

Why the Self-Righteous Grumble

Sermon on Matthew 20, 1-16

Good people of Westerly, brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. A Vineyard in the Tuscany

My wife and I traveled to the Tuscany, Italy, this summer for our wedding-anniversary vacation. One of the many things we got to visit there was a vineyard, where the owner gave us a tour of his land: We saw the famous Sangiovese grapes hanging heavily from the neatly lined grape vines, exposed to the sun, so the grapes would get direct sunlight, so they could ripen fully. When we travelled, Italy was experiencing a heat-wave, we visited that vineyard in temperatures of 98 degrees Fahrenheit and barely survived an hour in the sun! We were rewarded with a fabulous wine-tasting experience!

So, when I read the passage for our worship service today, I couldn't help thinking about those Italian workers, clipping away at each grapevine, carefully freeing up the good grape-batches, cutting off unwanted branches, removing weeds, loosening the earth – I'm not sure I would be able to work under such conditions for a day in the enormous heat they were likely exposed to.

2. Being without work

But the men the landowner picked up at the marketplace early in the morning did not have much choice. They were seasonal workers that had no other income than what they could earn each day – IF they found work. There were two kinds of workers in Israel at the time of Jesus: There were servants, who had a fixed job in a place and worked there continually. And there were the seasonal workers, who did NOT have a permanent position, but had to find new work every day.

I can't quite imagine what it feels like to be exposed to such job-insecurity and anxiety: "*Am I going to find work today – or am I not? What will my children eat if I don't bring any money home tonight?*" I read the novel of the great American writer John Steinbeck called "Grapes of Wrath" last year. He does a fabulous and haunting job of describing the desperation of a family from Oklahoma who is out to find hard-to-find seasonal work in California.

I myself have only been jobless once in my life. Some years ago, the company I was working for suddenly lost its main funding. In the wake, we had to let go of all of our employees, including myself. For three and a half months I was without work. I had to apply for unemployment benefits the first time in my life. I will never forget the shock I felt, when I was suddenly without income. The existential fear that would run through my head at night: "*Are we, my family and myself going to make it through this?*" "*What do we do now?*"

3. *What is a "denarius"*

I imagine the workers the landlord found at the marketplace in the early morning were similarly anxious and desperately eager to work. So, when he hired them for a "denarius" they were likely very happy! A denarius was the amount Roman soldiers were paid for a day of work. It was twice the amount servants earned for a day of work, so it was a generous salary – even if the workers had to work 12 hours that day, from 6:00 am – 6:00 pm! The workers contentedly went off to the vineyard and began their day's hard labor, relieved to know that their families would eat that night!

4. *An unusually pro-active employer*

Curiously, the landlord does not join his workers in the vineyard to supervise them, or to make sure that they work hard enough! Or even that they do the right kind of

work! This unusually proactive employer goes back to the marketplace four more times that day, at 9:00 am, at twelve noon, at 3:00 pm and one more time at 5:00 pm. Why did he do that? Why did he not hire all the workers he needed at 6:00 am and had them all work for the whole day? He would have gotten more productivity out of his workers, if he had done that! I guess that behavior suggests that this landlord was a very unusual employer! Maybe he knew that some of the workers were not yet ready in the morning. Maybe he knew that they had to walk a few miles to even get to that market-place to find work. So, he wanted to give them another chance! He practically spent his entire day going after jobless workers, and brought some back to his vineyard after each of his excursions. As if he wanted to make sure that everyone who wanted to work, would have an opportunity! As if he wanted to make sure that no one was left behind. What a kind and utterly inclusive, caring landowner. Did he hire more workers than he needed, just to get them hired? So many of these questions that come up for me remain unanswered.

5. Pay-time

Everything went well until pay-time came along. Interestingly the landlord had the workers who had worked only one hour, paid first, then the three-hour workers, then the half-day employees, then the nine-hour workers. The early birds were paid last. And *all* five worker-groups were given the same generous amount of pay, only that they all had to work different amounts of time for this work. If the men who worked 12-hours were paid generously, the ones who worked nine hours were, of course, paid more generously and the six-hour-workers ridiculously generous, and so on! But, here is where the grumbling began!

6. *Grumbling*

The 12-hour-workers witnessed that the one-hour workers received the same amount of compensation they had been promised. So, in a moment, they dropped the attitude of people, who were deeply grateful that they had found work and were being paid generously. In a moment they became discontent, jealous: And greedy! Now they expected and wanted more than they had agreed to in the morning. Now they became self-righteous. They developed a sense of superiority: “*We are better than those people who only worked an hour, three hours, six hours.*” *We deserve more! We have the right to receive more!*”

And I can't blame these good people! Of course, this payment-practice is not “fair” as the workers are not being paid equally – if we apply the worked hours as criteria! If we take on a legal perspective, we have to concede that this landowner is not treating his employees equally, maybe even unjustly. In our world today this landowner would be sued for discrimination by the first group of workers!

Jealousy is a powerful force and it can go both ways: We either don't want other people to have what we have, like a nice house, or an expensive car, an important position in our company, or access to our beautiful country, that is OURS, not theirs, so keep those immigrants out! Close the borders, we don't want those people here!

Or, jealousy makes US want what other people have, their houses, their cars, their positions, their promotions, their looks, their partners - or whatever we might covet! Usually, jealousy goes hand in hand with judgement: “*This is not right!*” “*That is not fair!*” And it is a stinging, powerfully unhappy feeling! WE deserve higher pay, we deserve a better deal, the nicer dress, the smarter child, the better school - you name it!

The wonderful Buddhist Teacher and scholar Thich Nhat Hanh, says: “*The moment we begin to cast judgment, we have already lost our ability to be*

empathic.” And we don't see the other anymore in what they may need: In our case: The moment the first-shift-workers began feeling that they were being treated unfairly, they lost their ability to see that their colleagues might also have families that need to be fed. That their co-workers may also be hungry and were desperately looking for work - just as they had been that morning. The moment we begin judging others, dear brothers and sisters, we lose our ability to understand them, to feel for them, to be compassionate.

7. *Jealousy and Abundance, Equality and Equity*

This wonderful parable is about two contradicting behaviors: jealousy on the side of the early-shift workers and abundant generosity on the side of the landowner. The landowner did not have to pay the five groups of workers what he did. He does it out of a sense of overflowing generosity and a spirit of abundance. He recognizes that the workers who worked only one hour, also have a family to feed, also have needs that must be met. The landowner is not taking on a perspective of equality, in that all must be paid equally. He takes on a perspective of what we call “*equity*” today: Some people need more help than others to get to the same place, to have a similar chance: The workers who the landowner found on the marketplace at five pm did not find work earlier because no one had hired them. It was not their fault that they couldn't begin work earlier. Maybe they were standing at a different location waiting to be hired. Maybe there were just not enough work-opportunities available in their village, and so they had to walk to this one? It appears that the landowner gave them the chance they had not received earlier!

8. *God's Grace*

The landowner of this story is a very unusual landowner because he is a metaphor for God, God's behavior, and the kingdom of God. We are introduced to a God of

immense generosity! A God of kindness! A God that will not stop coming after us, until we are ready and willing to “work” on the vineyard of justice, peace and kindness, the vineyard of inclusion, fair opportunities for people who have different levels of obstacles to overcome. God wants to show us a spirit of a welcoming hospitality, a world where we give people who are struggling to make ends meet, the same chance as those of us who stand ready to go at the marketplace at 6:00 am in the morning.

This parable is teaching us to be inclusive and inviting to let other, less fortunate people, participate in our privileges, in the relative safety our country offers, and invite others to partake in the economy and in the job-market so many of us are fortunate to be part of!

This is a story about God's unbelievable grace and God's sovereignty! We cannot earn God's grace; the kingdom of God is not a business deal, or a Human Resources policy. God's grace is given freely out of a spirit of overflowing love and abundance. This dear friends, is the good news for us today: Our loving God searches for us, looks for us at the marketplaces of our world at all the times of a day we can imagine. If we do one step towards God, we can trust that God will come ten steps towards us, like the landowner did in this beautiful parable of the workers. That is ultimately the reason why Jesus came to this earth and why he lived his life among us. As Jesus says it in John 10, 10: *“I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”* May it be so, dear friends! May we all have life and have it in abundance!

Amen