“Kingdom of Dirt: The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard”

The Rev. Katie Day

Matthew 20:1-16

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This morning is our first Sunday in a new series for the month of July: Kingdom of Dirt. It’s a series on the parables of Jesus that focus on the land, soil, seeds, planting, harvesting. Parables are stories – short or long, varied in rich images or simple. Jesus tells these parables, these stories, to explain the Kingdom of Heaven – perhaps, first, by digging up by the roots what we imagine our story of God is meant to be.

The Kingdom of Heaven is a central theme in Matthew’s gospel, something of utmost importance to Jesus. The Kingdom of Heaven is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures Jesus would have known, our Old Testament – a common refrain in the prophets, but also present in history and wisdom literature. And because of Jesus’ primary focus on it, it’s all throughout our New Testament writings, as well.

The Kingdom of Heaven, or Kingdom of God is meant to stand in opposition to and eventually in place of the kingdoms and empires of this world. Think of Handel’s Messiah – the Hallelujah Chorus – “the kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ,” quoting Revelation.

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is Jesus’ call to action in Matthew’s gospel, his invitation to any who would listen.

He describes what the kingdom looks like throughout Matthew’s gospel: it belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted, the righteous and those who keep God’s commandments. It’s inclusive of all and open to all, and its worth is often hidden. It’s for the humble, it’s for the poor, and for those who are childlike – as well as actual children. In the kingdom of heaven, expectations are reversed, positions of power and prestige are flipped to the bottom of the social economy, and those on the margins are at the top.

It’s hard to imagine the kingdom of heaven when all you’ve ever known is the kingdoms of this world. I think that’s why Jesus tells so many parables about it – to help the disciples, and all the other folks who hear them, like us, to imagine something so far beyond our understanding.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

He found some day laborers in the marketplace, agreed to pay them a day’s wage, and sent them into the vineyard to work. He did the same thing at 9am, at 12noon, at 3pm, and at 5pm.

Why does he keep going back? Why didn’t he just hire all the workers he needed the first time? Surely there were many folks in need of work on this day. Was there more work than he initially believed? Was he just bad at estimating how much labor there was to be done?

We don’t know why he went back, only that he did, again and again, hiring worker after worker, sending them to the vineyard.

At the end of the day, some folks have been there for hours on hours, have sweat in the heat of the day, become dirty from the work. I have friends who used to have a winery, and would work the harvest in the vineyards – it’s exhausting, back-breaking work.

The first workers hired have been here in this vineyard for maybe 11, 12 hours. Others have been working for less time, the last group only an hour, when the end of the workday arrives.

Then the vineyard owner does something else puzzling. He asks his financial manager to pay the workers, but from last-hired to first-hired. Those who had worked only an hour received an entire day’s wage. Amazing! What a gift – work for an hour and get paid for a day! You can just imagine the rest of the workers’ minds being blown by this…if *they* got *that*, what will *we* get? Then those who had worked 3 hours received…an entire day’s wage. Also amazing! But also…surprising.

Then those who had worked 6 hours, and those who had worked 9 hours received the same, and finally, those who had worked the entire day – 11 or 12 hours of backbreaking work – received a day’s wage. Hmm.

The story says they grumbled – they were unhappy with what they got, they should have gotten *more*, they thought, than what everyone else got. “What will *we* get?” The same as everybody else, which feels super unfair. After all, they were there *first*, they had been there the *longest*.

What’s interesting to me is the context of this parable – that’s my word, remember, context – where is this story in the Bible? What happens right before, and right after? Who is Jesus telling this story to?

Turns out, right before this story, Jesus says some hard things to hear about wealth and the kingdom of heaven. A rich young man asked Jesus what he needed to do for eternal life, which is another way of talking about participating in the kingdom of heaven – it’s not a far-off, after you die thing, but it’s a present reality here and now. So he asked Jesus what he needed to do, and Jesus told him to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor, and the scripture tells us the young man “went away grieving, because he had many possessions.” (Matthew 19:22) Then, Jesus said it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to participate in the kingdom of heaven, and encouraged the disciples not to give up hope, and assured them (and us) that with God, all things are possible.

And Peter (love Peter), said to Jesus, “Look, we disciples have left everything and followed you. What then will *we* get?” (Matthew 19:27) “If with God all things are possible, and participating in the Kingdom of Heaven is truly possible for everyone… Well, we’ve been with you for *years*, since the very beginning of this whole thing, we have been here *the whole time*, so what do we *get*?”

Preacher Eugene Lowry famously answered this question for Jesus with this: “Cheated. You get cheated.” (Lowry)

And then Jesus tells this story, of the landowner paying his workers. The ones who came first to the vineyard get cheated. The landowner responds to their grumbling with this: “It’s my money, and I can spend it however I want. I’m not unfair – I’m just generous. We agreed on one day’s wage when I hired you, and that’s what I paid you. Are you envious because I’m generous with these others over here?”

Yes. Those workers were envious. And so were Peter and the disciples. Envious of the generosity and grace given to others, latecomers, when we have been here the whole time.

When your identity is shaped by how long you’ve been here – whether “here” is your career, your neighborhood, your church, your role in friendships or other relationships – when your identity is rooted in “I was here first,” well, Jesus is telling us we are in for a disappointment.

“For the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.”

If you heard me preach a couple weeks ago on the book of Job, I shared that God is about covenant, not contracts. A contract is “what do I get?” “What’s in it for me?”

A covenant is relationship. It’s family. It’s why you hear a lot of preachers, myself included, refer to the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God as the “kin-dom.” Generally, you’ll hear me qualify that by adding “God’s wild, unruly, ever-growing family.” Ever-growing. God’s covenant with us, with all humanity, is an expansive invitation into God’s family, the kin-dom of heaven.

And just like a parent doesn’t love an older child more than a younger child because they’ve known them longer, there’s no special treatment for being first, no punishment for coming late, no privilege awarded for working a full day vs. just one hour. The kin-dom of heaven, like a family should be, is a place of grace, inclusion, and radical generosity. In the kin-dom of heaven, the only identity that matters is “beloved child of God.”

The kin-dom of heaven is like the Table. In just a few moments, we’ll be at our virtual table, celebrating the Lord’s Supper together but apart, the sacrament of communion.

All are welcome to join in. All. Whether it’s your first time or 500th, you are invited to this table, to participate in this glimpse of the kin-dom, the kingdom of God, where all are welcome, where grace abounds, where status or standing doesn’t matter, where we are loved simply because God loves, and not because of anything we have done or not done.

The kingdom of heaven is a surprise – it’s a kingdom of dirt, of real-world flesh and blood, soil and seeds, bread and wine. It’s where expectations are reversed. It’s where those who are last in line find themselves recipients of grace upon grace. Where all work is honorable, and honored, and landowners are generous beyond all understanding. It’s *not* like the kingdoms of this world. Thanks be to God.

# Works Cited

Lowry, Eugene. ""Who Could Ask For Anything More?"." Durham, NC: Duke University Chapel, 29 November 1987.