

# Eleventh Hour

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by William Searight

based on *Matthew 20:1-16* and *Exodus 16:2-15* (not printed)

for *Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church*

on the 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday in *Ordinary Time*

## **biblical text**

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

After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day,  
he sent them into his vineyard.

And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place;  
and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.'

So they went.

Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same.

And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing;  
and he said to them,

'Why do you stand here idle all day?'

They said to him,

'Because no one has hired us.'

He said to them,

'You go into the vineyard too.'

And when evening came,

the owner of the vineyard said to his steward,

'Call the laborers and pay them their wages,  
beginning with the last, up to the first.'

And when those hired about the eleventh hour came,  
each of them received a denarius.

Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more;  
but each of them also received a denarius.

And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder, saying,

'These last worked only one hour,  
and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day  
and the scorching heat.'

But he replied to one of them,

'Friend, I am doing you no wrong;  
did you not agree with me for a denarius?

Take what belongs to you, and go;

I choose to give to this last as I give to you.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

Or do you begrudge my generosity?'

*So the last will be first, and the first last."*

**sermon text**

The normal flow of our service here at Old Pine  
will soon lead us to pray the Lord's Prayer,  
where we ask, "Give us this day our daily bread."

How easy it is to pray those seven simple words when they are couched so comfortably.  
When we get into the rhythm of the prayer,  
and those seated around us each week—our pew neighbors—  
are all saying it with us.  
The natural flow of the prayer,  
with its left-over King James English,  
makes it hard to focus on any one petition,  
and before we can think about it or say anything more,  
our tongues have moved on to our debts and debtors.

Maybe at home you take more time with it.  
Maybe you don't let the words roll out so quickly,  
and let your mind stop to think about it.  
But here in worship, I have noticed that things go best  
when things roll along,  
and the steady pace helps us pass over the opportunity to reflect  
on such difficult words as these.

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

Our first reading this morning took us to the desert of the Exodus,  
where the Israelites fleeing for their lives are now starving.  
Sure they saw frightening plagues back in Egypt,  
and barely escaped Pharaoh's army with the help of some Charlton Heston theatrics,  
but in the desert they are truly suffering.

Walking through thirsty sands,  
their prayers stick in their throats on that one line,  
Give us this day our daily bread.

And yet not until they are murmuring,  
complaining against Moses and Aaron and by transference God,  
not until the people are literally asking for death,  
"Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,  
when we had food and ate bread to the full."

does God announce to Moses, "I have a plan."  
Only **then** does God respond, "Behold I will rain bread from heaven for you."

And yet, Moses takes it in stride,  
he doesn't look up into the sky and shout,  
"Well—it's about time!!"

No, not Moses,  
he merely nods when God offers first to test the listening abilities of the Israelites.  
    Thousands upon thousands of hungry people,  
    weeks without the food to sustain them,  
        and now they must prove that they can follow directions  
    and only gather enough to eat for a day.  
Give us this day our daily bread? And what about yesterday's bread?  
    And bread for the day before?

Over a thousand years later,  
    Jesus, teaching his disciples the daily lessons,  
        tells a parable with unexpected echoes to the Exodus story.  
A householder sends many workers to his vineyard.  
    The workers are there for a couple of hours and suddenly more arrive.  
    Another three hours go by and more show up,  
        and then three more hours brings another team.  
Finally, the last group shows up, at the eleventh hour,  
    and they work hard for an hour before the whistle blows, the bell rings,  
    the office cubicle farm clears out slowly.

The householder comes to pay the workers,  
    and—when I read the story, I picture a mischievous glint in his eye—  
        he instructs his payroll director to pay the eleventh hour workers first.  
Those first hour workers,  
    skin scorched and red from sunburn,  
    feet and hands shaking with exhaustion,  
        stomachs growling,  
must get a lesson before they get their pay.  
The last are paid first, and the dog-tired first are paid last.

Wouldn't you expect a bonus? Something more than what the eleventh hour workers got?

But last and first, everyone gets the same: a denarius,  
        the normal wage for one day's work.

And there's the rub;  
    there's the place that is supposed to make our faith itch.  
A paradox in the shape of a parable.

The kingdom of heaven is like a generous householder who pays his eleventh hour workers  
        a whole day's wage,  
    and like a stingy householder who pays those starving and exhausted  
        *only* a day day's wage, no overtime.

Oh, sure. There are several ways out of this terrible paradox:

One, the parable is about grace. Nothing more.

Jesus is telling his disciples that no matter who you are  
no matter when you join the crew,  
and follow him,  
that the grace of God is the same for you as it is for everyone else.  
And the eleventh hour worker can certainly say,  
“Thank you, God, for my daily bread.”

Or maybe this parable is about the history of the Church,  
the first hour workers are the Jewish Christians,  
the second hours are the Gentile Christians,  
and God awards life in Christ equally to both ethnic groups.

But I am led to believe that the complaining of the first hour workers,  
invokes the murmuring of the Israelites in the desert.  
For both first hour workers and starving Israelites,  
the daily bread is painful, it is heart-breaking, it is not enough.  
For them it is *not* a reward.

Who wouldn't want to be an eleventh hour worker, or at least a ninth or a sixth?  
When faced with the dire situation of the Israelites gathering manna,  
and the first hour workers barely scraping by,  
who would hope for daily bread earned with such trouble?

This is where I want to push back at Scripture.

To say to the gospel writer,  
“Matthew, are you sure you wrote this story down correctly”,  
or perhaps,  
“Maybe your grammar is a little off;  
translators will have a problem with that in time to come.”

In writing this sermon,  
I hit a road block here,  
which is not unheard of.

this is one of those texts that invite you to wrestle, to struggle with it,  
and never to say the answer is easy.

With my notes spread out before me and my keyboard resting quietly,  
I thought about the ministry of Jesus,  
how he healed the sick,  
opened blind eyes,  
brought good news to the poor

and proclaimed release to the captives.  
I thought about the feeding of the five thousand,  
when Jesus fed tired and hungry crowds  
and there was plenty left-over,  
and when comparing those stories with this paradoxical parable...  
well... something did not fit.

The paradox of the vineyard is not unfamiliar to us, to modern day Americans.  
In many neighborhoods,  
you need only visit a Home Depot parking lot to meet these vineyard workers.  
The story of day-laborers working this hard for small pay is not foreign to us.  
At a shelter in Atlanta where I volunteered, more than once,  
I heard the story of workers,  
hired for a day's work, promised a day's wage,  
and then beaten and abandoned when the work was done  
their pockets and stomachs as empty as they were the day before.

And in many a political season,  
we hear the debates over our nation's southern border,  
where everyday there are people crossing the desert,  
leaving a land where they were starving,  
with the prayer on their lips, give us this day our daily bread.

Yes, we Americans know this parable—this paradoxical parable—well.

The kingdom of heaven cannot be not like this,  
it cannot be like what we see here in nation or our world,  
No, the kingdom of heaven that Jesus came proclaiming  
was a place where eleventh hour workers,  
ninth, sixth and even third hour workers  
make certain that those who are starving,  
those who are toiling all day,  
those who cry out for daily bread  
receive it.

And those who need a rest,  
who need more care,  
who need more help,  
can receive that as well.

In the past few years, many churches, Presbyterians among them, have sought this vision of the kingdom of heaven.  
These churches have joined the protests of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers  
to realize that vision,

asking the corporations that buy from the workers  
to pay a penny more for each pound of tomatoes picked,  
because one penny was the difference between the workers starving and having enough to eat.

And now with a food shortage around the world,  
the Presbyterian Church is inviting its churches and individual members to fast,  
to forego their daily bread for the sake of those who have none.  
To show that the cries of the Israelites in the desert and the first hour vineyard workers  
do not fall on deaf ears.

Let me be clear:  
I believe our parable this morning *is* about grace.  
It is about everyone receiving it.  
It is about the way things will be and the way they ought to be.

Jesus came healing, giving rest, sharing food and showing grace abundantly.  
We cannot separate this parable from its teller.  
All who are invited to work, by which I mean all of us.  
Everyone who works in the field is charged to look after those who work the hardest.  
The faithful life is not a measure of most time spent,  
or best deal made,  
it is an invitation to see that everyone receives what is needed.

Already this church has sought this vision of the kingdom of heaven,  
already we have been serving meals to hungry seniors  
and making sure Katrina victims have a kitchen where they can eat.

Our challenge now lies in opening ourselves fully to this call to care,  
letting it permeate every aspect of our life together.

With Sunday School and Bible Study,  
during potluck luncheons and baseball games,  
and, oh yes, in worship and at home,  
we must let the Spirit transform our time together into holy time,  
where we become workers called to fulfill our own prayer:  
Give us this day our daily bread...  
Give us *all* this day our daily bread. **Amen.**