

**The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church
Sunday, September 20, 2026
Matthew 20:1 - 16**

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

This is definitely, I think, one of Jesus's most famous parables, often called the "Workers in the Vineyard," or something like that. And it tells this story, which we told during the youth message of people showing up at different times of the day and at the end of the day everybody is paid the same.

And so most often if you come to a church, and you hear somebody like me talk about this passage, you hear it talked about in the way we sort of finished the youth message. God's love is unbounded. God doesn't keep tabs on God's love but offers it to all of us equally. No matter when we show up, no matter when we start following, no matter how we start following.

For others, they teach this passage saying this shows God's history of salvation. Those who first came to the vineyard were the Jewish people and then the Christians and then over time other groups were included. As a gay man, I hear this story and I think, "Wow, even I, showing up late to the party, can experience God's full love."

We hear these spiritualized reflections on this story, but we must remember that the person who told this story is not a person of pure spirit. Ours is an incarnational faith. A faith that believes the material body and spirit were joined deeply, intimately in a way that had not happened before the person of Jesus. To only hear this story spiritually denies the truth of who Jesus is and who Jesus asks us to be.

So, what if we told this story and we said this really is about workers, real workers in the field. Not just workers in our Gracefully Green garden, but workers in corporate America, workers in small businesses around our town and region. What if it's talking about us as employees?

A hint of what this parable is talking about can be found right here in our own church. We have people who are hourly employees, and hourly employees are offered the benefit of paid time off but it's prorated. So, if you work a certain number of hours in this church you get a certain number of hours off. If you work half that time, then your time off is prorated and you only get paid for half the time you're off.

We might hear these things and think that's fair. We look at our own jobs that we've worked and we think, oh yeah, different people work a different number of hours. Maybe not everyone is entitled to health benefits. Maybe not everybody is entitled to the same amount of time off. Maybe some people get an education allowance while other people don't. And we think that this is fair.

But have we heard the story that Jesus just shared with us? Because it goes to the very root, to the molecular foundation, of our sense of fairness which is one of our deepest, most deeply held convictions. That life should be fair. That we should belong to institutions which are fair. That people should be fair to us and we should be fair to them. And Christ in this parable is saying not necessarily.

Maybe there is something more important than fairness. maybe the most important thing is to be treated as equals in our humanity. Why is it that some people are allowed to have health care and others are not? Is that fair? Or does that, on some deep level, deny the humanity and the right to health to others around us? Maybe even ourselves. Don't we all deserve time not to work but to explore the beauty and wonder of life not having to worry about when we have to get back to the office?

If you say somewhere in your heart, he is talking crazy, good. Because Christ came to challenge us, not just to soothe our assumptions and our prejudices, but to transform our hearts and our minds. And he does it by going to the very foundations of our beliefs, even about something as foundational as fairness.

When I asked all of you if it seemed right that God loves all of us the same no matter what, you all said yes. When I asked if it seemed fair that Tyra got the same amount of money that Ben did, you all shook your heads no.

Why is that?

Christ is calling us to look into our hearts and our minds and ask ourselves why do we have these different ideas of fairness. He starts off the passage by saying, "The kingdom is like the community that he Christ is building and inviting us to become members of and to build in our lives and in this world is a community that isn't fair. It's something more than fair." And he's telling us if we settle for fairness, we haven't entered into his community. So, as I said, I invite you to think within yourselves about how you think about fairness, how you think about what is right, how you think perhaps Christ is crazy and what he is saying can't work in the real world. But perhaps he's saying we live in the fake world and what he's offering to us is a reality infused with a knowledge and an understanding and experience of what God's true love looks like in all of its unfairness.

Amen.