

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon Title: "Equal Extremes"

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"Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" While we did not read these words today, these are the words of the disciple Peter that essentially prompted the parable of the laborers in the Vineyard that we heard in our Scripture reading. Peter, a few verses before the end of previous chapter, is wondering what all of this work of being a disciple, what will it lead to? He is wondering what are the benefits of giving up everything? What is the carrot on stick that will propel followers to take up their cross to follow Jesus? And so, he asked this question of Jesus - what then will we have? In other words, what will we get for our faithfulness? What will be our reward for following you?

But, in our scripture reading for today, Jesus offers an answer to not only the question that Peter raised, "what then will we have?" he also answers a question that is lying beneath the one Peter asked, that is not verbalized but one that Jesus perceives. This question is about a fair reward - "will what we have, those who have been following you from the very beginning, be the same or greater than what others will have? Will there be a fair distribution of this "reward"? What does "fair" mean in the kingdom of God?"

The idea of fairness, is one that we encounter many ways throughout life. I think of a kid, looking at two bowls of ice cream, one for you and one for a sibling, making sure that your sibling didn't get more than you. Is it fair for one to get more than the other? When you work with a team, whether on a class project in school or a job related endeavor, no matter how much work, time, and energy the individuals put into the project, the end result will be shared among the team. Is it fair that a "lazy" member of the group or team should get the same reward, same grade or same glory, as the "hard working" members? And I am sure you can think of many other examples of moments when the issue of being fair has come up in your life. This is a human question and a human concern and so, as Jesus seeks to respond to the end reward of being a follower

of Jesus, he is also going to be responding to this human concern of will my reward look the same or be greater than others? Will my reward be fair – whatever fair means?

In our parable today, we start off in the early morning as the landowner of the vineyard, who is equated to God, went out into the marketplace to find laborers for the day. As he hired them, he agreed to pay them a denarii, the usual daily wage, enough to live on for the day, and the laborers accepted – for it was enough. Then, throughout the day, the landowner kept hiring more people, who would be working less than those hired early in the morning. Equate this continual calling into discipleship with the church in any day and age – there will be some who accept the call to follow Jesus early in life, later in life, near the end of life – there is indeed an array. Some of the vineyard laborers had to work through the hottest part of the day, while others who were hired later did not. For those who worked long and hard, one can imagine their backs to be aching and their hands sore and those who worked the fewest hours, may have barely broken a sweat by the time the day had ended. And in this story, the landowner, again representing God in the parable, gave to everyone, the usual daily wage. He gave them all enough. And when the fairness of this was questioned, the landowner affirmed that it was indeed fair in kingdom of God. For it does not matter when someone says yes, I will follow, yes I will labor, for the reward is the same. It will be the same for those who labored all the days of their lives and those who labored for only 1 hour. It will be the same for those who stood in line for the shortest amount of time and those who stood in line the longest. It will be the same for those who are considered the last and least as the first. For, as Jesus reminds us often, in the eyes of God, there are not opposite extremes in the kingdom of God but equal extremes – the first shall be last, and the last shall be first – there is not a hierarchy but an equality. There is no VIP section of heaven for those who labored the longest or worked the hardest. The very first disciples receive the same as you and me and those yet to come.

For when we actually step back and think about what that reward is, what the end result of our labor, no matter how long we have labored, it is about being surrounded

eternally in God's love and grace – to experience it fully and forever. This is what God wants to give us all, just as the landowner gives out an equal wage. Not just those who serve the longest or hardest, God want us all to receive this gift of eternal love and never-ending grace. This gift is enough – for we need no more and God will give us no less.

As we sit here today, and try and place ourselves into this parable, we are not in line at the end of the day waiting to receive a reward but we are in the midst of the vineyard. We are in the midst of the labor that God has called us into as we follow our Christ. And whether we have been at this work for a long time or we have just been called to begin working, at the end of the day, the gift of God's love and grace will be received by us all. And yes, we catch sight daily of the gift of God's love and grace – there are certainly rewarding moments in life, mini manifestations of this parable from one day to the next, but in the grand scheme of things, we are still laboring on. We experience God's love and grace now but its true beauty and awe, the full impact, we have only glimpsed. And that full impact is for us all – at equal extremes of the spectrum of life and of discipleship. For God longs to be generous in love and grace with all of humanity. God wants all of us to have exactly what we need – and that is to be surrounded by the same love and the same grace. No matter how long we labored, no matter if God called us into the vineyard early in the morning or nearing dark, God gives to us the same in the end. God gives us the same love and the same grace, and in the kingdom of God, this is fair.

Yes, in our world, we may always have questions of what is fair and what is not. But one thing that we know for sure, is that receiving the gift of Jesus, the gift of God's love and grace, this is for all, and it is only fair for it to be shared equally. And we can spread it around to any and all. So let us labor on, as the faithful followers of Jesus, knowing what awaits us at the end of the day, knowing what awaits us at the end of the journey. Amen.