

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
24 September 2023**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

A woman was out for a walk and found a frog in a trap. The frog said to her, "If you release me from this trap, I will grant you 3 wishes." The woman freed the frog and the frog said, "Thank you, but I failed to mention that there was a condition to your wishes: whatever you wish for, your husband will get 10 times more or better!" The woman said, "That would be okay," and for her first wish, she wanted to be the most beautiful woman in the world. The frog warned her, "You do realize that this wish will also make your husband the most handsome man in the world." The woman replied, "That will be okay because I will be the most beautiful woman and he will only have eyes for me." For her second wish, she wanted to be the richest woman in the world. The frog said, "That will make your husband the richest man in the world and he will be ten times richer than you." The woman said, "That will be okay because what is mine is his and what is his is mine. The frog then inquired about her third wish, and she answered, "I would like a mild heart attack."

You know you are about to have a rotten day when reality does not fit within your expectations. Life throws you a curb ball. You are expecting a particular result and you receive something totally different. For many people, the random and unexpected nature of life is anxiety producing. We worry about life becoming unpredictable. Today's collect asks God to help us "not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly." We worry so much about everyday things. We want a predictable life we can control, but as many wise philosophers have said, "Stuff happens!"

Matthew illustrates this point by giving us the story of a Master who went out to hire laborers. He hires some early in the morning, some at midday, some towards the middle of the afternoon, and some when there is just one hour left before the workday is finished. So, far in the Jewish mind of all who hear this parable the expectations have been set. Every listener is prepared to hear how those who arrived earlier were paid a much higher salary than those who arrived late. After all, this is a Middle Eastern setting where there is a very clear hierarchy established. Men are in charge over wives, children and servants. The main duty of men is to provide for their families and to accumulate wealth. Work was the primary way to achieve this. The harder and longer you worked, the more you were paid. These are the expectations!

Jesus then delivers the punchline. There is a great reversal that no one expects. Not only are the first to arrive paid the same as the last to arrive, but they are paid last. They are made to watch as the latecomers are paid the same amount. Yet, they were not cheated, they were not robbed, they were not mistreated. In fact, they were paid exactly what they deserved. The problem is not that they got paid too little, but rather, that the

latecomers were paid too much. They saw this as unfair. This level of generosity is not culturally acceptable. These late comers should have been paid a fraction of the day's wages. This is what is expected. By changing the cultural expectations, the landowner upsets the status quo and the natural hierarchy in the community.

Jesus makes it very clear that in the Kingdom of God those who are last will be first and those who are first will be last. This is a total reversal in the people's expectations. People will not get paid in accordance with the amount and the duration of their work but in accordance with their master's generosity. Obtaining a reward is no longer attached to human effort and the production of results, but rather it is absolutely dependent on the compassion and generosity of the employer. He and he alone is free to determine how he spends his money and to whom he gives his blessings. He judges "worth" in a very different way than we judge worth. He is not as impressed by merit as he is by obedience. The only act worthy of reward here is that the laborers obeyed the master and went to work. It is not so important how much they produced, what is important is that they showed up in obedience to the landowner.

This reversal on how we are to view and treat people is not new to Matthew, chapter 20. In fact, throughout chapter 19 and throughout the rest of chapter 20, Jesus challenges the hierarchical value system of the day: He reverses the cultural understanding of divorce as a man's prerogative and preaches against divorce on Biblical grounds (19:1-12). He proclaims children to be blessed by God, which is extraordinary because children are truly at the bottom of the totem pole, but Jesus declares that the kingdom of God belongs to them (19:13-15). He challenges the idea that the acquisition of wealth should be a man's major task on earth, as he tells the rich young man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (19:16-22). Seeking the kingdom of God and following Jesus as a disciple is more important than accumulating wealth. This is a major reversal of the cultural mandates of the day.

In today's passage, Jesus challenges the view that blessings from God are dependent upon our good works, our merit, our human effort, and therefore, those who are first are the most blessed, and those who are last are the least blessed. In fact, I believe Jesus knew there would be conflict in the church between those who have been members from the beginning and those who would come later. Proximity to the time of Jesus's life would be considered a high value, whereas the more distance you had from his life, death and resurrection, the less important you would be. Jesus challenges the idea that those who have been members of the church for generations are somehow more valuable than those who just arrived last week. In God's eyes this is not the case. His mercy and his compassion are so abundant that it is sufficient to cover both groups

Now, for many of us, even today, this type of behavior sounds unfair. How dare God welcome the latecomer who conveniently finds Jesus in prison; who makes a last minute death-bed confession; who accepts baptism suddenly, after spending a lifetime of

sinful and scandalous living? Many of us want to tell God, “How dare you treat the sinner with Grace? How dare you welcome the prodigal son back? Don’t you know how little they have done for you? Don’t you know how bad they have been? On the other hand, look at me! I have done so many good works, I have been to church every week for the last month, I pray three times a day and I fast every Friday. Look at me! I deserve your blessings more than anyone else here.

My friends God’s grace is never ending and all we need to do is to receive it willingly, honestly, and gratefully. We worry too much about too many different things and yet, the only one thing worth our effort is having a proper relationship with Christ. A relationship built on trust not merit. A relationship built on love and gratitude for what he has done for us and not on human effort. A relationship built on absolute dependence and not on rigid, self-righteous religiosity.

Today, I invite you all to trust in God’s provision for your life. May God release you from all anxiety. May he help you rest in him and give you the peace that you need. And may God make you more dependent on his Grace and love and less dependent on your own efforts. Amen!