



Pentecost 17 (Proper 20 A)
September 20, 2026

RCL: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; **Matthew 20:1-16**

Opening Prayer |

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Context |

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus invites his disciples and followers to consider novel approaches to established wisdom. In the sermon on the mount, Jesus frequently uses the device, "You have heard that it was said," followed by some common assumption. Yet in each instance, Jesus then offers a challenge, "But I say to you," refining the traditional custom with a new practice that more clearly emphasizes the importance of justice, compassion, and love in our common life. The whole gospel can be read through this lens. A richer understanding of the text emerges when readers ask how a given narrative, discourse, or parable reveals God's justice, compassion, and love, and how our new understanding might impact the way we live.

In today's lectionary text, Matthew's telling of the parable of the vineyard owner immediately follows the story of the rich young man who asks Jesus to lay out the specific parameters necessary for salvation. He and Jesus run through the basics—he should avoid murder, adultery, stealing, lying; he should honor his parents and love his neighbor as himself—but the man may sense that something else is missing. He has followed the basics of the law, but perhaps he does yet know the peace that comes from "living a life worthy of the gospel" (Phil 1:27). Jesus advises the young man to free himself from his possessions and take part in God's restorative economy. But the young man resists being unmoored from his wealth. Jesus then muses on how difficult it is for wealthy people to live in right relationship with God.

This message is utterly shocking to his disciples and modern audiences alike, as we have been culturally conditioned to subconsciously believe that wealthy people must be more worthy or hard-working or naturally deserving than poor people. The disciples, like us, operate from an

unexamined, knee-jerk theology which assumes that God gives wealth to some according to their merit. Jesus offers a contrasting view that wealth may not be a blessing at all. In this, he suggests that the kingdom of heaven will not follow the familiar social order. Jesus tells this parable to explain the topsy-turvy hierarchy of the kingdom, where “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matthew 19:30).

Theological Reflection |

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus teaches that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes to the marketplace to hire workers and negotiates a specific wage with the first batch he hires. At intervals throughout the day, he adds more workers to his roster when he notices that there are more people who still need work, and he assures each group that he will pay “whatever is right.” Near the end of the day, he makes one more trip to the marketplace and sees that some people are still there. When he asks them why they are still there, they reply that no one has hired them, and he tells them to go to the vineyard, making no mention of wages.

At the end of the day, he directs his manager to pay the workers in reverse order, and he pays all of them the specific wage that was negotiated by the first group, the only people who possessed enough agency to have any kind of say in what they were paid. The first group of laborers complain to the vineyard owner that it is not fair for the owner to make all these other people “equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (Matt 20:12), and the vineyard owner reminds them that he can do whatever he wants with his own money.

Like all parables, the parable of the vineyard workers resists easy interpretation, yet it gives us an opportunity to expand our understanding of the characteristics of God’s realm, of God’s very nature.

The dissatisfied laborers demonstrate the danger of insufficient empathy. They are so embroiled in their own experience of work and sun that they are unable to imagine the challenges faced by any of the other groups of workers. While it is true that the first-hired worked toiled in the sun all day, the prospective workers waiting for employment stood under the same sun, in the same heat. Those who were hired in the first batch may have spent the entire day working, but they were spared the burden of worrying about whether they would manage to earn the wages they needed to feed their families, the wages they needed to survive.

The dissatisfied laborers may have sold themselves the story that they were hired first because they possessed more merit and were more worthy than those who had to endure an entire day of standing, waiting, worrying and mentally preparing to go hungry. The parable demonstrates how quickly a lack of empathy can create bitterness within the workers’ hearts. Instead of enjoying the wage they agreed to, their own satisfaction has been poisoned. The landowner’s practice of equity for all now feels like injustice to them.

The landowner pushes back on this, reminding them that his generosity to the other workers—providing labor and a fair daily wage for all—does not take anything away from them. Instead, his generosity creates a community where everyone has enough to survive. Last and first can be treated equally, because there is no “first” or “last” when true equality exists.

Reflection Questions |

- When have you experienced unexpected generosity? How did you receive it—was it easy or challenging for you?
- Have you ever experienced frustration, like the first-hired workers felt, at a windfall of generosity for others in your life? Where did the frustration come from?
- What does this parable tell you about God?
- What does it mean to you to “live a life worthy of the gospel”?

Faith in Practice |

Take a moment each day this week to practice and develop your skills in active empathy. Pick someone different each day to focus on in your time of meditation and prayer. They could be people close to you or from a further orbit. Imagine what their life might be like, what struggles they might face that are different from yours, and how their life might be similar to yours. Let this empathy invite your prayer for them.

***Kelly Lauer** is a Deacon in the Diocese of Los Angeles, discerning a call to parish ministry. She recently completed a Master of Divinity at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. In addition to serving as a Deacon, working full time in college administration, and co-parenting two teenagers with her spouse, Kelly enjoys creating art and making music.*



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