

# 16th Sunday after Pentecost

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## Introduction

The parable of the day labourers leads us to questions about justice and power.

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## Text

### Matthew 20: 1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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 the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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## Comment

On its face this is a story about a labour dispute, taken up with the boss. He has paid those who worked an hour as much as those who worked a day. The reader gets caught up in a question of fairness and the fact that this arrangement is simply not fair. A few details from the story, however, suggest that this parable is using the question about fairness to talk about something else: the use of power.

'You have made them equal to us.' Ah. Here is the outrage. The wage for the day seems fine, and no one argues that this was what was agreed. The problem is that in paying others as much as the first, the landowner has taken away from the early workers their distinction as being on top. Equality in this instance is an insult. It robs the labourers of their place on the pecking order. When you make the first last and the last first, and those in between the same, you remove the ability for others to compare themselves – except from degrees of indignation. These labourers are upset not because they didn't receive enough money to live on, but because they live in a world that ranks people based on material possession and which connects one's wealth to one's worth.

The landowner makes a mockery of that worldview when he asks, 'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?' He has power because he has money, yet decides to upend the entire system by distributing what he has equally without further adjustment.

With one exception: he does make a point of paying the late arrivals first, after all the workers have gathered. He makes a distinction between the last and first, but only to highlight that in terms of payment, they will all be treated the same. Again, well within his rights. Again, a blow to the expectations of power and money going hand in hand, and for both to be the means of differentiating oneself from others.

The parable of the day labourers suggests that in the kingdom of heaven, power upends such structures of separation, however unfair that may be.

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## Response

As we view this passage through the lens of conflict, we recognise that there is a question of fairness at play. But is anyone at fault? The indignation that the early workers, and perhaps the readers, feel at the end may be understandable even if it is not justified. The landowner is within his rights to distribute his money as he sees fit.

Our response, therefore, may be to reframe questions about fairness and justice not with the calculus of what is logically correct, but with what heals brokenness, what lessens the separation between parties. A system based on fairness will reward some more than others, codify distinctions and make rigid our divisions. A system that views justice through the eyes of the vulnerable, however, will use power to heal brokenness and to transform division into something closer to whole.

As we approach our inevitable conflicts with a desire to determine who is right and what is fair, perhaps we should begin by asking where the power lies and how we might redistribute it so as to equal out any underlying disparity.

A simple exercise we may choose to undertake when applying this passage to a particular conflict is to map out where the power dynamics (explicit and implicit) lie. That may well provide insight as to what is at stake, what fears are driving our interactions, and where there may be space for co-created solutions.

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## Prayer

God of justice,  
God of grace:  
in trying to make sense  
of this world  
and our place in it,  
we train ourselves to expect  
reward for our work,  
and our worth to correspond  
to our effort.  
As you give us today what we need,  
may we consider not  
where we stand in relation to others,  
but how we might stay  
in communion with those who,  
like us, are dependent  
on divine generosity.  
Amen.