

Sunday, September 24, 2017 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost
“Eyes on the Ball”

Matthew 20: 1-16

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Story Applied

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

They arrived early, before sunrise. That’s when you had the best chance at a good days’ work. The most responsible, the strongest, the most driven and motivated workers gathered in the dark to wait to be picked up for work. It’s a scene still played out today when crops are ready to harvest or in the parking lot of your local big box hardware store – men and women waiting to be hired as day laborers for whoever needs a job to be done. And it’s the image Jesus uses to describe what the Kingdom of Heaven is like in our text today.

The workers are ready and willing. They keep their eyes out for the landowner and are clear eyed about the expectations. Do an honest days’ work and earn an honest days’ wage. The agreed upon pay, the denarius is exactly that – the standard going rate for a days’ work. The answer the call and get to it.

There’s a saying in many sports – “Keep your eyes on the ball.” In baseball, don’t turn your head with your body when you swing at a pitch. In golf, don’t move your head in your swing. We could go on and on, the point is that when you’re looking where you you’re supposed to look you’ve got a better chance of success. When you forget the fundamentals bad things happen.

It makes you wonder about those who weren’t picked up for work. By now the sun is up. It’s the third hour, about 9am and the vineyard owner comes back to get more workers. It’s understandable, some days you just don’t get picked first, it’s just not your day. The vineyard owner says he’ll pay whatever is fair... an amount isn’t agreed upon but hey, 80% of a days’ work is a lot better than nothing and so they go. You can understand too some not picked up until noon or even 3pm but would you or would you not agree that the owner might see

diminishing returns and lower his expectations on those who were left unselected late in the day? 5pm rolls around. Sunset is just a little over an hour off. A few stragglers stand waiting around. To be sure some were there in the dark and weren't selected, for whatever reason – less strength, less health, less appeal. And maybe others grabbed too much shuteye, or had to be hassled by their spouse to go and earn that day, or rolled up groggily nursing a hangover with their patented, tried and true eye-opener – a coffee? Or perhaps another drink? Or who knows, maybe they just missed the cut. Whatever the reason it should be obvious to any passerby seeing people waiting late in the day would have to think these were the underqualified workers that no one else wanted. And even if the quality of what they produce were up to par with the pre-dawn work crew, they sure haven't worked as hard. But who cares if the owner wants to go hire more workers, everyone is sober eyed about reality, from the predawn crew working a 12 hour day and the 5pm crew squeezing in a merciful morsel of income – we're all going to get paid according to what's fair, according to what we've done.

None of this should be any great surprise. This is how the world works, isn't it? If you take care of your body, you'll be healthier for longer. If you work hard at school you'll get better grades. If you train correctly, you'll perform better in athletics. Oh sure there are exceptions but in general, so it goes. When your eye is on the ball you'll see the best results. It's a truism about life and it pays dividends in a lot of different areas.

The day ends and the workers line up to receive their wages, the last arrivals first. To the surprise of absolutely everyone he pays these late arrivals a denarius! A full days' wage for an hour of work! Understand, no one is mad about this – the 5pm arrivals are thrilled. The 3pm arrivals even more so, visions of three days' wages dancing through their heads. And those 12 hour workers? Will they be paid 5? 10? Half a month of wages for a days' work? This vineyard owner is generous, recklessly so!

Jesus, for His part shows us a little bit of what this means on the cross. There's a criminal being executed with Him who asks, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your

Kingdom.” Jesus tells him, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” A thief, a thug held responsible for a capital offense – surely not the same paradise promised to the disciples that He chose to walk with him, right? And the early church grappled with this too, when a Roman soldier named Cornelius received the Holy Spirit in baptism, or when Paul started going to preach Jesus’ death and resurrection to Gentiles! You know what a Gentile is? It’s a non-Jewish person. It may seem “churchy” and kind of antiseptic but in Jesus’ culture, Gentile was almost a curse that you’d spit out through snarled lips – the barbaric fools who worshipped false gods, polluted their bodies with unclean foods and personal habits. These Johnny-come-latelys didn’t have to get circumcised like all the Jewish men, they were uncouth, their habits strange, their language coarse, their knowledge and understanding lacking, their lifestyles full of messy tension and conflict between the way they used to live and the way a Christian is supposed to be.

The 12 hour laborers started their own comparison game the moment they got excited at how much the Johnny come lately 1 hour workers got – because surely they deserve more! Like a golfer eyeing the green or a batter looking beyond the fence, they saw achievement and glory and took their eye off the ball. They saw greater and lesser and made distinctions about who would be the greatest and who would get the most money and they forgot the most critical part of all – it’s all about the vineyard owner – maybe that’s why they suddenly weren’t so happy with their pay when this vineyard owner would only pay what he originally agreed to and treated all the late, new people the same as them.

Friends, it’s the same for us – it’s all about the owner of everything around us that is made. It’s about God. It pleases Him to be generous to everyone – whether you’ve been around since the start or you’re late to the game there’s no such thing as seniority in God’s kingdom. Even if we have no trouble doubting God’s generosity to save everyone, when we know we can’t earn our way to Heaven it’s so easy for those around the longest to slip into expecting more honor or acknowledgement whether it’s based on our title or education or knowledge or

age or length of time that we've been in a church. It's easy to start resenting when newer people don't speak the same way and don't know as much or have coarser language or messier lives filled with tension and conflict and contradiction that is open and easier to spot than our more well-hidden contradictions, differing with the way a Christian is supposed to live. That is, when we take our eyes off of God and play the comparison game. Jealousy and resentment is a sure sign that we think we deserve something more and our eyes have left the real prize – the generous hand of our Giver God.

It cuts both ways – remember, it's all about God. Even once we've been given this generous forgiveness and promise of eternal life it's so easy for us to back down from going to work in the world – in our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods and community relationships, or our church because we're so inadequate and there are others with better titles and education and knowledge, or are older or been going to church longer, and who am I to tell about Jesus, or study the Bible, or speak up with a thought, or think that anything I do can make a difference?

Playing the comparison game over and against each other will only take our eye off the ball. Jesus – His perfect life, His blood soaked cross and His empty, open tomb are the only thing that matters whether you've been here as long as you can remember or you're realizing for the first time in your life that you believe in Jesus and what He did for you. No matter how you seem in comparison to anyone else, no matter how hard you've worked or tried or how badly you've failed and struggled, the only thing that matters is Jesus and the generosity He drops on all of us, no matter how equal it makes us to each other, is more than enough to give us more than we deserve and put to shame even our wildest dreams. God bless you in Jesus' name, Amen.