

The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Isaiah 55:6-9

Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Well, you wake up in the mornin', you hear the work bell ring
And they march you to the table, you see the same old thing
Ain't no food upon the table, and no pork up in the pan
But you better not complain, boy, you get in trouble with the man.

That's the first verse to a classic rock-and-roll song by Creedence Clearwater Revival – Midnight Special. That song has its roots in black folk music in the South, as early as 1905. It's a working man's song. It's also a prisoner's song. That song is realistic. It speaks about the world the way it is, the working man's world during the depression, the prisoner's world where absolutely no one does you any favors. Sometimes work is a grind. Sometimes it feels like forced labor. The song does a fair amount of complaining. And it begs for a train, the Midnight Special, to shine its light on the overworked and underappreciated soul. Let the Midnight Special, shine a light on me. Let the Midnight Special, shine a ever-loving light on me. The light of the train is seen as the light of salvation, the train which could take them out of prison or out of the chain gang and set them free.

Sometimes you just don't want to go to work. How many of y'all ever called in sick when you weren't sick? How many of y'all ever skipped school? Why you'd do that? What about church? Have you ever skipped? Eh, I just don't feel like going. Have you ever come half-hearted? Have you ever come only cause the old lady nagged you into going? Perhaps you know what it is to be an eleventh-hour worker, one who shows up just at the very end. Jesus tells a Midnight Special parable. It's pretty easy to understand, this parable. Every single person in the parable is easy to understand, but the group that doesn't get talked about too much are the eleventh-hour workers, the ethical scalawags who saunter in at the end of the day and saunter out like bandits when the owner of the vineyard gets all generous. It'll do your heart some good to thoroughly digest this parable – so let's take each element of this parable and really look at it.

It's a kingdom of heaven parable – Jesus tells us that right off the bat. A kingdom of heaven parable means that it's a church parable, the kingdom of heaven that is among us now. Where is the kingdom of heaven now? It's in Christ's church. Don't put this parable far off; it's not far off. This parable is now – it's a heavenly reality that is being realized as I speak. The vineyard is the very present kingdom of heaven and God is the Master of the vineyard. It's not really about labor – it's about grace, and forgiveness, and blood, and conversely, it's also about emptiness, and futility, and dead ends. The Landowner wants workers and He happily hires a bunch of them. They too are delighted to come into the vineyard for the wages are good. Things are so good at the vineyard and the Landowner is so interested in filling His vineyard with workers that He ventures back to the marketplace to hire some more. Over and over, the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour – He keeps hustling up laborers and the vineyard just keeps welcoming them in. Remarkably, at the end of the day, at the eleventh hour, the Landowner finds people just standing around, seemingly waiting to be hired, and He hauls them out of the parking lot at Home Depot and puts them into His vineyard too.

That is the church. That is the church you belong to. That is the One, Holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church. The vineyard is the kingdom of heaven that is present and real and open in this place and throughout the world. The kingdom of heaven is present here because the Word of God is preached here. Sinners hearken to this Word. We find Christ here, the One who gives His life for ours, who elevates our lives above the cultural sewer, above the dead-end of self, who elevates us with His holiness and His love and His light. Little vineyards like ours dot this planet and God beckons sinners into His kingdom, into His church, into the life of His Son. He never tires of drawing people into His church, the vineyard of Christ crucified and risen. There is not just one hiring season. Anybody and everybody; anytime and all times and all types – young and old, weak and strong, introverts and extroverts, rich and poor – He hires ‘em all.

Here is the truth – here is a beautiful truth that you must cling to and savor and let saturate your mind – God loves bringing people into His vineyard. He’ll never stop. He loves people – all of them. He loves His vineyard, the place His Son prepared by dying – that’s where He wants us. So He calls, He recruits, He beckons people far and wide, continuously, to come to Him, to come into His church. “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me; hear, that your soul may live” (Isaiah 55:1-3a). The Good News of Life in the Person of Jesus Christ – that is the message that goes out into the world. People hear it – the divine message of forgiveness and hope and union with God. That His Word is for us; that He is all love and all holiness and all goodness and that His divine intervention in history – to bear our sin on the holy cross and lay down His life for those He loves, that He rose victorious over death – that Word is for all of us – that Word does not return empty but truly all kinds of people, in all kinds of situations and stages in life – they hear it and believe and come into His church, His kingdom, His vineyard.

Now, the eleventh-hour workers – do you know what that tells me? The eleventh-hour workers... they weren’t there when the Landowner was hiring earlier in the day. Whatever they were doing... it didn’t satisfy. Near the end of the day, they were empty and they knew it. The world didn’t have they needed. **The world doesn’t have** what God has, **the world doesn’t have** what is found in the vineyard, **the world doesn’t have** what is found in Christ’s church. All those other ten hours – it didn’t change the end result; only God has what we need. Look for meaning all you want in this wide world – the vineyard is where life is. It’s not “work” in the vineyard; it’s salvation, it’s heaven’s grace; it’s God’s sacrificial beauty dwelling in your soul. Some folks start out in life looking at the church like some kind of prison, a cheerless institution of rules and chain-gangs and buzzkills. Billy Joel sang: “I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints.” That’s how the unbelieving world sees the church. The unbelieving world sees the vineyard as a place that they’d rather not work. So, they chase their impulses for 10 hours and ultimately find themselves empty. At the eleventh-hour God is delighted to call them, and into the vineyard they come. Happily, they come.

And they receive the same grace, the same love, the same blood of the same crucified King as those who came into the vineyard at the beginning of the day. We are all so fortunate to be in the

vineyard – a lush place, green with the fruit of heaven, green with the recreating water of baptism, green with the adoring Love of Our Father, green with the fellowship of the saints, green with the majesty of the Scriptures, green with the music of the resurrection, green with the tree of life. We all are recipients of the same amazing grace – none more and certainly none less. Regardless of when they come, regardless of the circumstances in which they come, our fellow workers in the vineyard are a delight to us for they are a delight to God. All of us realize that it is only the Lord Christ who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat. The burden of Good Friday and the scorching heat of our sin was on Him. He gladly performed the labor of love, the labor of sacrifice that we could not do. His reward is put in your pocket. His labor opens heaven. Divine generosity defines this congregation. His ever-loving light shines on me. His ever-loving light shines on you. His ever-loving light shines brightly in this little corner of His vineyard.