

“The Great Equalizer”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Proverbs 3:13-18

New Testament lesson: Matthew 20:1-16

“In everyday life we don’t really assume there is a direct relationship between the work we do and the pay we receive. We don’t really assume that people who do the most work, or the most important work, receive the highest pay.” So says New Testament professor Darrell Doughty.¹ “What are the most important jobs in our society,” he asks. “School teachers? Lawyers? Garbage collectors? Truck drivers? Construction workers? Football players? Nurses? What jobs are most necessary? Who does the most work? Who receives the highest pay?”

In everyday life, the relationship between the work we do and the pay we receive is by no means obvious, says Doughty. That is the point Jesus is making in his story about the landowner and the laborers. Jesus is showing us that how we value ourselves and others is different from how God looks at us. We see this in how each group feels in Jesus’ story as events unfold in our New Testament lesson for today.

Imagine you are the workers about to be hired first thing in the morning. You’re standing around, let’s say, the Square in Independence hoping to be hired so that you can buy food for your family later that day. No work, no food. But you’re one of the best workers. So you’re standing there with a sense of hopefulness and even confidence as the landowner arrives to hire workers? And sure enough, you’re among the first group hired.

OK. Now, imagine you’re one of the workers left standing there. No work for you. You feel discouraged, don’t you? Meanwhile, the workers hired first are thrilled to be getting a day’s pay. They are triumphant, leaving you resigned to the disappointment of no work that day and the fear of no food for your family that evening. But then things change. The landowner comes back at 9 a.m., 3 p.m., and 5:00 in the evening – just an hour before quitting time. And each time he comes back, he hires more workers. Immediately, your discouragement and fear turn to blessedness and amazement – maybe even disbelief about just how blessed you are!

Meanwhile, the workers hired first are upset that you are getting paid the same as them for less work. They grumble to the landowner, saying, “... You have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” But think about it, what is worse – a good day’s work or spending that day in the fear of not being able to feed your family?

¹ Darrell Doughty, "Laborers in the vineyard," Jesus: History or Myth? Courses.drew.edu. Retrieved by Homiletics Online April 1, 2002.

We all have our burdens, and we all have blessings even amid those burdens. The tragedy is when we let pride and envy turn blessing into burden. The workers hired first turn the blessing of a good day's pay into the burden of jealousy and envy. "... Are you envious because I am generous?" asks the landowner.

How often do we take our blessings and let them be ruined by jealousy, just because someone has it better – or at least we think they have it better. But remember, we all have our burdens. No one can know what another person is really facing in life. Often those who seem to have it all – wealth, beauty, family – have the biggest burden of all. We just don't see it.

But God sees it. God sees each one of us in our particular situation and blesses us meeting our particular need. Not what we want or what we think we need, but what we really need – unconditional love, joy, compassion, inspiration, plenty – enough food or money or spare time or whatever we need to get through the day. The challenge for us is to not take God's blessing and turn it into a burden.

Church is a great place to come and experience the blessings of God apart from the burdens of the day. Church is one of the few places where someone can walk off the street however they are and be treated just like everyone else. Not that we don't struggle with that – we do; we're only human. But at the end of the day, everyone gets treated the same, if they're open to receiving the love, joy, compassion, and abundance available to them here.

Being open to all God offers means being willing to share and celebrate God's blessings with others. It means setting aside our assumptions about people and embracing them for who they are. And when they're the one's pushing us away, it means being the first to forgive and forget, rather than treating that person badly in return.

It's like the Chiefs fan who was all hyped up after we beat the Patriots in this year's season opener. The guy turns to his buddy and says, "I can't believe you're not freaking out with me. It's a huge win. Why aren't you excited?" "Because I'm not a football fan," he says. "My parents love baseball, so I do too." "Well, that's a lousy reason," says the guy. "What if your parents were morons? What would you be then?" "Then I'd be a football fan."

Being open to all God offers means being willing to share and celebrate God's blessings with others. It means setting aside our assumptions about people and embracing them for who they are.

We have the power to level the playing field at anytime – to set aside our jealousies and count our blessings, to let go of our hurt feelings and show love instead, to outdo each other in generosity rather than taint what we do have with the fear of scarcity. I mean, who couldn't use more time, money and energy? We all could. But that's no reason to take what we do have and ruin it by keeping it all to ourselves, or getting jealous about what someone else has by comparison.

God is the great equalizer, and faith-based places like church are God's playing field. The rules of the game are simple but hard – love in place of anger, let me say that again: love in place of anger, joy amid our struggles, compassion instead of disregard, inspiration that overcomes discouragement, and a Spirit of plenty in the face of scarcity.

When it comes right down to it, we can either approach life from God's perspective or society's, either like a community of faith or an isolated person gripped by fear. Either way we do it, there's only one way that leads to a win, and that's God's way.

When we play by God's rules – focusing on love, joy, compassion, and a Spirit of plenty, no matter what anyone else is focused on – that's how we and everyone come out a winner. That's how all the world is blessed by God.

I pray this week that for your love wins out over anger, that you find your way toward joy amid life's struggles, that you give and receive compassion. I pray that divine inspiration overcomes any and all discouragement, and that any sense of scarcity you may have would be over taken by a Spirit of plenty.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, thank you for the work we are given to do. May we find gladness and joy in all its toil and difficulty, its pleasure and success, and even in its failure and sorrow.

We would look always away from ourselves, and behold the glory and the needs of the world, that we may have the will and the strength to bring the gift of joy and gladness to others; that with them, we stand, to bear the burdens and heat of the day, and offer you the praise of work well done.

We pray for all those effected by the recent natural disasters, for those battling illness and recovering from injury and those others we hold in prayer.

We pray for those grieving the loss of loved ones, especially those grieving the loss of Vince Robbins.

We pray for ourselves and for our world, using the words that Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**