Sermon from
September 20, 2026
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Amy Vigesaa

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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I remember meeting David when I was helping at Union Gospel Mission in Duluth for a youth trip. He was sitting at one of the tables, and we were encouraged to mingle and eat our meal with the people who came there out of need. David experienced housing insecurity and lived in his car most of the time. He wore dirty clothes, didn't smell great, and was missing a tooth in his smile. It was easy to make assumptions about David. It was easy to think his situation was a result of poor life choices and mistakes he had made, or even laziness. Then I sat down to eat with him and learned his story. David used to be a pilot. He worked for a major airline company that made some cuts, and he lost his job. Over time, the stress of being unemployed, along with the financial problems that came with that, proved to be too much for his marriage and his wife left. He lost the house. Having no family nearby and no job prospects, he ended up living on a friend's couch until he overstayed his welcome and had to leave. Life fell apart. Some people are one paycheck away from disaster. We live in a world where there is great disparity between the rich and the poor; where the wealthy continue to get wealthier and the poor continue to struggle.

There is an old movie starring Will Smith called, "The Pursuit of Happyness." In this true story, Will Smith plays a dad named Chris Gardner, who is evicted from his apartment after missing rent and he and his son live with the reality of homelessness- spending the night in a subway restroom and another in a shelter. He ends up taking an unpaid internship in hopes of making a better life. I remember this one scene where he's following his boss out of the building to talk with him about something and as his boss gets into a taxi, he realizes he doesn't have any cash to pay the driver. So, he asks Chris to pay the driver. Chris reaches in his wallet for his last $5 and hesitantly hands it over knowing what it means for him. Some people are one paycheck away from disaster.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out to hire workers… In our parable today, Amy Jill Levine, Jewish Theologian and NT Scholar, says, "we have a householder, a group of laborers, a wage on which all agreed, and a vineyard that required harvesting. Nothing abnormal yet." Parables have layers though, and they are meant to challenge our thinking. We can take the parable at face value and see what there is to learn. We can also see within the parable spiritual lessons and learn more about ourselves and more about God. Both would be good interpretations. We continue…

The landowner continues to seek out workers, returning to the market 4 more times- that is unusual. Each time, he hires more workers, brings them to the vineyard, promising to pay them whatever is right. There are a few things here

to notice: This landowner either completely underestimated the amount of work to be done in the vineyard, or he has a different agenda. The landowner ended up hiring everyone available. He went out over and over again looking for people in need of work and he paid all of them. At the end of the parable, we begin to understand what he might be up to. He has the manager pay the workers beginning with the last and ending with the first. This makes it so those hired first see exactly how much the others get paid. It's as if the landowner wanted them to witness his generosity. It's as if the landowner wanted them to see they are all equal. It's as if the landowner wanted to confront the feelings boiling to the surface, pointing out envy and greed and a lack of goodwill toward their fellow human.

Our Old Testament story illustrates these emotions so well within a different context. The Ninevites were people known for their violence and scandalous behavior. They were enemies of the Israelites and had committed atrocities against them. Jonah had good reason to feel the way he did about these people. But they changed. They turned toward God. So, God showed mercy and Jonah didn't like that. He couldn't bring himself to celebrate God's love for his enemy. And he throws a temper tantrum: "I knew it! I knew you were gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from punishment!" See, Jonah wanted God to burn Nineveh to the ground, but God held to his character, to his loving nature – gracious and merciful.

The laborers didn't want the landowner to show generosity to the latecomers. They didn't want equal pay for their counterparts, so they grumbled and complained. As Debie Thomas states, "we know how the world is supposed to

work. Time is money, and fair is fair. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is NOT fair." That's what we do, right? We hold our anger. We become envious. We think we deserve more and they deserve less. We see a person's faults, their crimes, their failings, but miss seeing their worth in God's eyes. We miss seeing God's love for them. We welcome God's mercy when we're on the receiving end, but get upset when God shows a generous love to someone we've deemed unworthy. Sometimes, like Jonah, we don't want God to be generous with others. Sometimes, we wish God would act contrary to God's character and be tougher on the people we think less deserving. Sometimes, like the first hour laborers, we get upset at God's generosity even though we received enough; even though we received what God promised. But the landowner challenged their anger. And God challenges ours.

God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Always and to everyone. That is good news.

For us the big question seems to be "What is fair?" But for God, the bigger question is, "What is right?" We have a perception of fairness, of what makes sense. Working all day long versus working only an hour ought to result in different pay. That is ingrained in us. Western society is so focused on the individual that we often forget about the situation and needs of others. Many other cultures are better at seeing how humanity is connected. That the world is better when everyone's needs are met. Paul Wellstone addressed this in a speech back in 1999, saying, "when we all do better, we all do better."

There is a story of an American who visited a village in Africa and stayed for a good length of time. At the end of his visit, he wanted to give a gift to the children but in true American form made a competition out of who would receive it. He gathered the children around and explained that whoever won the race would receive this beautiful fruit basket. So, the children lined up and began the race. One little boy finished before the others and received the prize of the fruit basket. And then the American saw something they didn't expect: the winner invited all the children to sit in a circle and they shared the fruit. When the American asked the boy why he did that, why he didn't keep the fruit for himself, the boy answered, "How could I enjoy the fruit if my friends didn't have any?"

God is generous. Amy Jill Levine states, "The householder is both analogous to God and a model for followers of Jesus. Those who have should seek out those who need. Not only do householder and laborer need each other, the work of some laborers benefit the lives of others. In the end, all have enough to eat, and the rich recognize their responsibility to those who are less well off, a responsibility that includes not simply giving a handout, but hiring "workers" who can thus preserve their dignity. We learn what it means to act as God acts, with generosity to all."

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As followers of Jesus, we are expected to not only consider what is fair as a cultural norm, but ultimately what is right in the eyes of God. This ought to shape our treatment of those we tend to disregard, ignore, or pass judgment upon. This ought to be the defining force of the world we desire and the future we hope for. We have a responsibility to one another. We have a commitment to the common good of all people. This is one of the reasons Dane's Place exists. That we might give dignity to a family who is struggling to make ends meet. That we might be generous as God is generous, knowing we all do better when we all do better.

So, let's check our emotions, setting aside envy and greed, bitterness and anger. Let's instead, allow God to challenge our ways and transform our hearts. Where we have power, may we advocate for those with less. Where we have wealth, may we be mindful of those in need and help. Where we have opportunity, may we ensure the dignity of those without. It could be us. It doesn't take much for life to fall apart. When we all do better, we all do better. Let's see in this parable what we need to learn about ourselves and what we need to learn about God.

God is generous- always and to everyone. That is good news.

Amen.