

Matthew 20:1-16

Preached at St. Luke's Rincon, Georgia

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Right now, the US economy is a hot topic. Just turn on the television, pick up the paper, or talk to your neighbor, and it becomes very clear—the economy is on our minds. We are all paying a lot more money to be mobile and have food on our table. Some have lost a lot of income or financial savings in volatile markets. Others have lost their homes, unable to afford sudden increases in mortgage payments. Jobs are tenuous or unavailable. As I watched CNN the other night, I perked up with interest as one of the financial advisors resorted to a Biblical reference. She said, “Like it or not, in this market, you are your brother’s keeper. If your neighbor’s home is in foreclosure, it affects not only the value of your home, but the entire financial system on which we depend.” The phrase “brother’s keeper” is a reference to the story in Genesis of Cain and Abel. Because of jealousy, Cain murders his brother Abel. After the murder, God asks Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain replies rather sarcastically “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” In our present sense of economic instability, we look at the declining resources and the increasing need and we wonder am I my brother’s keeper? Will my brother keep me?

Today's Gospel reading is about an economy. Jesus tells a parable about a most unusual economic system. Jesus' parables are like a football that is thrown in the midst of a huddled group of gossiping teenagers. The person tossing the ball abruptly calls, "Hey, Catch!" And immediately the attention of the group is diverted. Everyone is forced to look up and deal with this incoming missile. Jesus tosses today's parable into the midst of the disciples just when they are exploring their own economic anxieties-- the costs and benefits of discipleship. They hear Jesus speak of how difficult it will be to get into God's kingdom if you are rich. Then Peter bluntly asks—what about us, Lord? What about those who have given up everything to be with you from the beginning? Will we be taken care of? Yes, Jesus, says with love to Peter. You will be taken care of, but so will a lot of others—especially those you might not expect.

Then Jesus tosses today's economic parable into the conversation of the disciples and immediately all attention is refocused on God's economy. Yes, God has an economy—a plan for our salvation. The word economy comes from the Greek word *oikonomia* which means "household management." So God's economy can be understood as the way God manages the household of creation. God has a plan for the redemption of the world, through the gift of incarnation, the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. God's economy is rooted

in abundance. Today's parable gives us a chance to view the world through the lense of God's economy, and we see how radically different it is from our own. Although Jesus spoke often about money, today's parable does not appear to offer an exact model for human systems of economics and labor relations. Instead, today's parable gives us a chance to look up from our huddle of anxiety—our struggle to figure out which brother is keeping which other brother. Our vision is suddenly transformed as we respond to the eternal truths Jesus throws our way. In God's abundant economy, there is no recession. Love and grace flow unconditionally. In God's abundant economy, we are all invited to participate, we are all brothers and sisters. In God's abundant economy, Christ is everyone's keeper.

As we reflect on today's parable, let's look up from our own little circle of worry and anxiety and have our attention captured by the new vision Jesus throws our way. Let us enter the eternal reality of God's perfect world—the reality we are called to live in as Christians. The owner of a vineyard goes out into town and hires some laborers for the day. He promises to pay them what is expected. A day's wage, and this will be enough to feed their families. The owner of the vineyard continues to venture into town repeatedly during the day, encountering other laborers who had not been

hired. He even asks them, why are you just standing here? And they reply, no one has hired us! So, the owner of the vineyard hires the workers. All through the day. However, the big surprise is that those who labor all day get the same pay as those who labor less than an hour. The original laborers get paid exactly what they agreed to, so it is not like the owner is violating a contract or committing a crime. No. But we feel like this story is not quite fair. This parable is not quite right. Shouldn't the people who labor longer get paid a little bit more for all of their work?

The owner responds--- friend, you got what you need, am I not allowed to give out my resources generously?

And Jesus says, this is what the Kingdom of God is like. This is God's abundant economy.

Remember, we are adjusting to a new reality that Jesus throws our way. We are reacting to a vision of the world, where everything is turned upside down.

As we live into the realities of this parable, we think about the laborers who work all day. We think about those who come late and receive payment for a full day of work. We think about the owner's response, "Can't I give generously of what is mine?"

And we might experience two strong responses:

1. First of all, Jealousy. Those who labor in the field all day are jealous of those who don't. I know I experience jealousy on a regular basis, especially as a middle child. I often think of that infamous episode of the Brady Bunch, when Jan, the jealous middle child, gets so sick of her older sister Marsha and all of her perfection—"MARSHA, Marsha, Marsha"—she says. "That's all I ever hear." I am with you, Jan. Right now, I am very jealous of my dear friends Sally and Kerry. We moved away 8 years ago and they stayed right here in Rincon. Now they are deeply settled in this wonderful community, and we are essentially starting all over once again, making a home in Savannah. The root of jealousy is need, and this is true for those laborers. They want to be assured that they are doing something worthwhile. Yet, their jealousy is blinding and judgment abounds.

3. The second reaction we might want to confess is that most of us probably identify with the laborers who got there early. Especially if you make it to church on a regular basis, and if you have had a hand in building up this wonderful faith community, you have been working in the field. Very hard. Those who are still asleep right now might really get on your nerves for multiple reasons.

So we acknowledge our jealousy and our identification with the long-suffering laborers. And we ask, how does this parable transform our vision? How does this parable pull us out of our anxiety and jealousy and fatigue? There is a key word that I have not mentioned yet. It is a word we hear a lot in church. But I am saving the word, because I want to stay with the parable that Jesus has tossed our way. I want us to experience the shock of the story. I want us to acknowledge the complex reactions and emotions that the parable evokes. And now we can say the word, the beautiful word that is central to our life in Jesus Christ. GRACE. This parable offers a glimpse into the realities of God's Amazing Grace. Through this parable we are given a lense, we can put it on and look around—Can you really imagine? Can you really imagine that There is enough unconditional love to go around. That all who are hanging around the fields will be taken care of? That the owner of the vineyard will continually recruit and pay laborers out of abundance and not scarcity? Grace. As Christians, as people made one with Christ, we live in that Amazing Grace. WE don't have to be jealous. We don't have to be limited in our imaginings of God's abundance. And we don't have to see ourselves as sweating in the fields during the heat of the day. Instead we can envision ourselves as those who arrive at 5:00, do a little work and receive enough for

our supper. And in doing so, we get over our own savior complex, and Christ becomes our keeper. Jesus labored for us more than we would be able to ever withstand. Jesus plowed the field in the fierce heat of the day, preparing the soil so that we could grow abundant crops. And Jesus doesn't get jealous. As we join with Christ, helping to plant and tend the fields, we lavish in the generous, abundant care of God. The grace of God's love in Christ is our safety net, our surprising gift. We joyfully accept the call to come labor in the field, knowing that a hot supper awaits. We rejoice as the owner continually reaches out to those who are in need, and we welcome them into the riches of the vineyard.

Let us close by praying, again, the Collect of the Day:

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

