Give Us This Day—Mt 20:1-16

In many parts of Texas, across much of the southwest, you’ll find groups of men gathered early in the day near stores like Home Depot and Lowe’s. These men aren’t waiting to get into the store. They’re waiting for work. In Texas we called them *braceros*, a Spanish word that means a manual laborer. A few times, driving along the frontage roads, I saw trucks or vans pull up and three or four of these *braceros* jump in, off to some job. They probably didn’t know what work, or where, or even how long, but they knew they would be working that day, and for that they were glad, because for every two or three that had a job for that day, there were still several other *braceros* standing there, waiting. For the most part, by the afternoon the groups had evaporated: either they had all been taken to jobs, or those who hadn’t gotten work that day just drifted off somewhere.

When I hear the landowner ask those men at five o’clock—in Greek, the eleventh hour—“Why are you standing here idle all day?” and then I hear their reply, “Because no one has hired us” (20:6-7), I can’t help but think of those *braceros*. In these troubled economic times, with a “recovery” that seems lackluster at best, I cannot help but think of those *braceros*, and these words of Scripture. I have great compassion for those waiting, waiting to be hired.

The image of the vineyard is an image of the kingdom, and it may throw us momentarily to think that it could be possible that there are those in the kingdom standing around idle all day. Surely, in the kingdom, everyone has work to do, God’s work, the work of loving one another, helping one another, worshiping together, growing together, announcing the Good News. Jesus often talks about the kingdom as though it were far away and will be a long time in arriving. That’s true. We do pray, and will still pray, “Thy kingdom come,” for a long time yet. Jesus sometimes speaks as though the kingdom were already here, and he is right about that, too, because where Jesus is, there also is his kingdom. Where the Church is, where the true Church truly is, there also is the kingdom. If we are a true church, and if we are truly a church here, then the kingdom is here: dwell for a moment in the beauty of that thought.

Haven’t you ever caught glimpses of it, here among us? From what I have been able to glean here and there around town, part of the reason we do not have younger families worshiping with us is because we do not have younger families here. That’s sort of a Catch-22, an impossible and impossibly frustrating conundrum. It also reflects the impatience of youth. It’s understandable that people come looking for similar people, but I would hope that people would also come, maybe even come even more, looking for the kingdom.

Beloved, realizing the presence of the kingdom takes time, and you who have been part of our life together here for so much of your lives know that very well: realizing the presence of the kingdom takes time. It requires time to get to know people, to come to care about them and to be allowed into their lives, into the deeper recesses of their hearts. It’s in the depths of our lives, and our life together, that the kingdom will be found.

It is quite possible, then, to be in the kingdom without realizing it. There are many people, even in this community, who do not realize they are in the kingdom, who do not realize that there is work, kingdom work, and life, kingdom life, to be had, here, now. They are still standing around, like those *braceros*, wondering if they’ll work today, wondering how they’ll get their daily bread today. You can give it to them. You have it to give to them. You can bring it to them. Christ always invites and encourages us to bring this bread to them.

I’d like to be able to tell you that these people will just magically and magnetically be drawn here, and all we have to do is sit quietly and wait for them to come pouring in—a miracle! Hallelujah!!—but you already know that isn’t so, and it hasn’t ever been so, not around here, anyway. Anyone who has come into this church has come here because of an invitation: either a direct invitation from one of you, or else the indirect invitation of our life together: our worship, our love for one another, our love for others, our growing in Christ,

and our telling others about Christ. When we offer our Fourth Monday meal, or our children’s lunch this summer, when we are present at the Fall Festival, and when we are speaking with our neighbors, we are offering an indirect invitation to come and be part of what is happening here.

It isn’t flashy, is it? We don’t tend to get caught up in the WCIC beat; we don’t tend to let our hearts get swept away by singing the same words over and over. That’s not our way. God is honored and glorified in many ways: here is our way. We do not seek an intellectual connection only, though I’m sure we’re accused of it. We do not seek an emotional connection only—probably no one will ever accuse us of being too emotional! Beloved, we seek spiritual connection, life connection, that connection of our entire selves with God, head to toe, inside and out.

Singing the same words over and over bores us, but doing the same things over and over—praying, serving, loving, growing, telling—of these things we never grow tired. We do not feel called to make a huge display of our commitment to God because we know that we display our commitment through worshiping our God, through the love we have for one another, the love we share with others by serving them, through growing together in Christ, and through sharing the Good News with those whom we find standing around, even at the eleventh hour.

Jesus’ parable today, then, is about going and seeking those standing around idle, waiting to be “employed” by the Gospel. Today’s parable is also about feeling cheated. Those workers in the vineyard from the start feel cheated when they see they are paid the same wage as those who worked the barest part of an hour. And I dare say that we may also feel a bit cheated, from time to time, when we think how long we have been laboring here, and see that those who are only recently arrived appear to have a lavish reward.

Have you ever felt cheated? Bilked? Duped? Because my mother isn’t here, I feel like I can tell this story. This is one of those stories about which my family still laughs—or at least I and my sister laugh. Back in the summer of 1986, we took a memorable vacation down through California. San Francisco—enjoyed it. Los Angeles—can live without it. San Diego—loved it, even with the earthquake. And then there was Tijuana.

Tijuana is the American’s image of Mexico. And there we were, with our tour group, in the middle of Tijuana, gawking while trying not to gawk conspicuously, my mother almost certainly clutching her purse, my father trying to keep our little herd together, and my sister and I wanting to dart this way and that, to look at those things and see these things, and try some of that and stare goggle-eyed at him, or her, or them, or that. Well, it wasn’t like home.

But the prices! Who knew things could be so cheap, both price-wise and quality-wise. But the one thing that was not cheap, quality-wise, was the vanilla. Oh, there’s nothing quite like real Mexican vanilla, is there? The aroma! Have you ever noticed that vanilla is sort of expensive at the grocery store? I don’t mean the imitation stuff, but the real thing, those little bottles that go for upwards of $11. And the Mexican vanilla, forget about it! Well, my mother was very aware of the price of vanilla back home, so when she saw fifths of vanilla, fifth-sized bottles of real Mexican vanilla, going for $2 a bottle, we practically had to hoist her jaw back up. I never saw her hands grab so fast—bam, bam—a bottle in each hand—forget about clutching that purse for dear life: grab the vanilla!

Yes, she was pretty impressed by the bargain she got. Now, our tour guide had encouraged us to negotiate the price we would pay for anything, but when we saw the prices being asked, negotiating for a lower price seemed silly. Where were you going to find bottles of real Mexican vanilla, that size, for that price?!

And then we rounded the corner, and my mother saw the same bottles of vanilla being sold for half the price she had just paid. Long afterwards, she would still talk about that. Years later, my sister and I still talk about her talking about it. Now, you’ve got to remember what I told you my mother had paid for those massive bottles of vanilla, bottles, I might add, that lasted us about a decade.

She paid $2 a bottle. Yes, but only afterwards did she learn that she could have had them for $1 a bottle! That afternoon, there in Tijuana, she felt cheated.

Have you ever felt cheated? Would you feel cheated if someone had worked half as long as you had, yet was paid the same? At the start of the day, as Jesus tells us, the landowner agreed with some laborers “for the usual daily wage” (20:2). Those workers know just what they will be paid when they start work that day. They agree to the wage. They must have thought it was a fair wage for the day’s work, because it seems as if they had a bit of leverage in these negotiations: they weren’t going to work for too little, and they also knew what was too much.

It’s only at the end of the day, when the first hired are to be paid last, when the first hired see that the last hired are being paid the usual daily wage, that they start to think something special is going to happen. It’s only as those who were hired last are receiving their wages that those first hired begin to realize that the landowner is a very generous man; indeed, a lavishly generous man. And then they receive their wages, and they feel cheated.

And the thing that really appears to gall those first hired isn’t even that the wages were the same, but that, in paying the last the same wage they received, the landowner has thereby “made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (20:12). You’ve made them equal to us. How dare you! It’s strange, how prejudice creeps into human thinking, human feeling, human acting. Perversely, in keeping with our thinking and our feeling, that prejudice doesn’t deny the generosity of the landowner, the giver. That prejudice doesn’t even deny that something quite special, a miraculous act of generosity, is happening here. That prejudice that colors thinking and that colors feeling, that colors our doing, cannot bear the thought of equality, that by this miraculous, generous act on the part of the owner of the vineyard, the lord of the kingdom, all those who labor in the kingdom are made equal, whether they worked late into the day or only arrived to work late in the day.

Cheated. Cheated of what, though? Of what belongs to us? What belongs to us? Cheated of our wages? We will be paid the wage to which we agreed when we set to work. Cheated that someone whom we do not regard as our equal should be treated as our equal? What does that say about us? How does that reflect upon us? We ought to be rejoicing in that miraculous generosity, and in the diligence of that landowner, who goes out even at the eleventh hour to seek workers to bring into the vineyard. And instead we feel cheated, cheated that latecomers should be shown such wonderful generosity, should be made, by that generous act, equal to us.

The landowner, the lord of the kingdom, got it right, I’m afraid. He tells those who feel cheated, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? . . .

I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?” (20:13-15).

I guess in this, I’m with the *braceros*: it’s enough for me that I have work to do this day. May God help me to be content with my wages, and may He give me a heart even half as generous, as joyfully generous, as His own.

And to Jesus Christ, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever.