

**Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish,
Saint Francisville, LA
24 September 2017**

Matthew 20:1-16

A lot of humor is built on the premise of unexpected results or unexpected endings. You listen to a brief story, imagine a likable ending, and suddenly discover a different ending, which produces laughter. Let me see if I can illustrate. An Irishman decided to take his son out to get his first beer. The father ordered the son a Guinness at the local pub, but the son didn't like Guinness, so the man had to drink the beer. He thought that perhaps the son would like some Smithwicks, but the son hated Smithwicks, so the father had to drink it. After this he thought, "May be my son likes light beers." So he ordered both a Karlstad and a Karlsburg, but the son hated the beers as well and the father had to drink them both. Confused, the man said, "Perhaps my son is a whiskey man, like his grandfather." He quickly ordered a fifth of Powers Whiskey, but the son hated the whiskey. Of course, the man had to drink the whiskey himself. By the time he finished his fifth of whiskey he was so drunk he could barely push his son's stroller back to the house.

You see what I am saying? All through the story you were waiting for an adult son and not an infant. What makes the story funny is that reality didn't fit within your expectations. This happens all the time in real life. Life throws you a curb ball. You are expecting a particular result and you receive something totally different. This silly little joke may be funny, but in fact many of us are terrified of not getting exactly what we expect, what we consider fair, what our sense of right and wrong dictates we should get. We worry about life becoming unpredictable, about the "What ifs" of life. What if there is a "Crime Stoppers" Television crew waiting at my office? What if my wife stops loving me and in fact calls me by another man's name? What if I turn the television on and they are showing emergency routes out of the town? What if our church declines in numbers and we have to close our doors? We all worry about the "what ifs" of life. Anxiety seems to be a fact of life. Today's collect asks God to help us "not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly."

The Gospel of Matthew today is talking about the same basic concept. There is an expectation that is not met according to the central character's liking. The characters expect reward to be measured according to effort and not

according to the master's will. The first workers to arrive at the vineyard have a set of expectations that are not met. They expect to be paid more because they were there first, they did the most work, they have contributed the most to the Lord of the vineyard. But, not only are they paid the same as those who just arrived an hour ago, but they are paid last. This whole issue would not have been a problem for them if they had been paid first. Think about it. If those who were hired first had been paid first, they would not have found out how much the last workers to arrive were paid. They would have been gone by the time the last workers were paid. But, in fact, they are paid last and they are made to witness how much those who arrived last are paid. They are paid what is owed to them, but they believe it is very unfair that those who arrived last are paid the same. This makes them angry. Perhaps angry enough not to return to the vineyard.

The message of Matthew chapters 19 and 20 is that Christ reverses the normal hierarchical structures that exist in a Jewish household of the day. In these households three basic relationships exist: Husband-wife, Father-children, and Lord-servants/slaves. In each case there is an expectation of hierarchy, we know who is first and who is last, who controls and who is controlled, who orders and who obeys, who is blessed and who is cursed (or derives his or her blessings from the Master). Jesus reverses these power structures. For him the last, the invisible, the left-out, the ones without power, the needy, the least, are first. They are offered blessings. They are offered Grace. Christ has a radically new way of seeing the worth in people. People are not more worthy because they have a name, status or wealth. People are not more worthy of God's blessings because they have been Christians or members of a church longer than anyone else. People are not more worthy because they are more religious, more obedient, or more involved than others.

We too have expectations of God and we too become discouraged when God doesn't behave the way we want God to behave. We want life to be simple and predictable. We should be blessed for our efforts and others should be held accountable for their flaws. We should be rewarded for our faithfulness and others should get what they deserve for their lack of faith. We become overly anxious about earthly things because we are too busy doing things to prove our worth, we are too stressed out by trying to be all things for all people, we are too busy judging others, we worry too much about power and status, we pay too much attention to seating arrangements. And the same striving we have for the place of honor in our human relationships we have in our relationship with God.

We tell God, “How dare you treat the sinner with Grace? How dare you welcome the prodigal son back? Don’t you know how little they have done for you? Don’t you know how bad they have been? On the other hand, look at me! I have done so many good works, I have been to church every week for the last month, I pray three times a day and I fast every Friday. Look at me! I deserve your blessings more than anyone else here.

Ironically, what we ignore is that God’s grace is never ending and there is plenty for everyone. The only thing we need to do to get this grace is to receive it willingly, honestly, and gratefully. We worry too much about too many different things and yet, the only thing worth our effort is having a proper relationship with God in Christ. A relationship built on trust not merit. A relationship built on love and gratitude for what he has done for us and not built on our desperate attempts to gain God’s attention and preferential treatment. A relationship built on absolute dependance and not on rigid, self-righteous religiosity.

Today, I invite you all to trust in God’s provision for your life. May God release you from all anxiety today. May he help you rest in him and give you the peace you need. And may God make you more dependent on his Grace and love and less dependent on your own efforts. Amen!