



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Is it worth it?” **Sermon on Matthew 20.1-15**

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Our parable this morning comes in response to a rich young man who asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life. “Why do you ask me what is good? There is one who is good. Keep the commandments.” “Which ones?” Came the response. Jesus rattled off a list: ‘Don’t murder. Don’t lie; honor your father and mother. Love your neighbor as yourself. I’ve done all that; what do I lack? “If you wish to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

The young man went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus said, “Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of God.” And the disciples said, “Well, who can be saved?”

“With God all things are possible.”

Peter said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you; what then will we have?” Jesus said, “When the Son of Man makes his judgment, Everyone, everyone, everyone who has LEFT houses, brother, sister, father, wife, children, fields for my name’s sake will inherit eternal life; THE FIRST will be last, and THE LAST will be first.” Or to put it another way: Listen to this parable from Matthew 20: 1-16. Hear the Word of God.

Matthew 20:1-16

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the

last and then going to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

When I was 16, I worked for a landscaper for a couple of summers. I learned something called manual labor, and that's why I do what I do today.

I remember our little landscaping company being hired by the ball bearing plant to plant trees and shrubs in and around a 5-acre site of flat green grass on the back side of the plant. We arrived early in the morning. A truck full of trees and shrubs. I found a shovel, found the ground, and went to work. For a moment. It came to me that this lovely five acres of green grass was once an asphalt parking lot. I replaced the shovel with a pickaxe. Morning light by afternoon scorch. It stands to this day as the hardest day I have ever worked, and \$5.50 an hour just wasn't worth it.

It wasn't like the day before, when I was working on the irrigation problem in the muddy soil near a swimming pool, where the lovely Amy Morrison just happened to say hello to me on her way to work...on her suntan. Focus... focus...focus... \$5.50 an hour- was it worth it? It depended upon the day. I remember one Saturday when I was the only laborer who showed up to work. I called my boss, who answered rather groggily, because the night before it was his 50th birthday and it was quite a celebration.

"What am I to do today?" "Why don't you just make sure everything is watered and call it a day?" I said, "Well, there's a trailer of sod here." He responded with words that I can't repeat here. What he knew, and what I knew, and what you will know is that sod left on a truck in the summer for a couple of days does not fare well. I said, "Where does it need to be delivered?" And I spent a morning laying a lawn full of sod by myself.

On Monday, my supervisor and I rode out to the house to see how the sod was faring. It was all green and good, and I was looking for something along the lines of "Well done! Good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master." What I got was "There's a bump in the lawn over there." This critique came from some guy who didn't report to work because of a hangover. \$5.50 an hour wasn't worth it.

When I got my landscaping job, I was happy to have it. But I wonder if, had I known what I was getting myself into, I would have gone to work. If it had been possible to show me a video of me being a "Saturday Sod Savior," and then cut to me on my hands and knees in mud, and the aroma of Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil just feet away, pickaxe a parking lot in the heat of the day, would my 16-year-old brain agree to the job? My 64-year-old brain tells me that the experience was so formative that you can't put a price on it.

When we are offered the job, who knows what we are getting ourselves into. When I agreed to the call here, there was no mention of having to deal with blue bows, COVID, fires in the sanctuary, ice storms, John Bailey...I just blindly took the job.

But sometimes we know. Sometimes we know. "That's not what I want to do with my life. It isn't worth it."

That rich young ruler was a fine example. "Eternal life, sure you can have it. Sell your possessions; and give the proceeds to the poor." And the rich young man didn't think it was worth it. Peter saw the young man walk away grieving and said, "We left everything for you. What's our reward?"

Apparently, Peter never read his contract. Check that.

It seems to me that Peter's contract changed over time. When Peter was hired, here was the contract. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And, for some reason, Peter signed the contract. But then the contract changed: "If anyone would come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me..."

"We left everything for you! What do we get?" Everyone, everyone, everyone who makes the sacrifice... gets paid the same. Peter got the same pay as Martha. Martha got the same pay as Mary. Mary got the same pay as Paul. Paul got the same pay as Timothy. Timothy as Theresa, Theresa as Francis.

Is it worth it?

We know the answer. Somehow the call of Jesus overwhelms our own desires. We know the answer. We know the time when "What's in it for me?" doesn't bubble up to number one. We know this.

I heard it at Friday's memorial service in this very room. Grandchildren said it well! One of them, whom I watched grow up here, said, "Grand Annie..." that's what they called Grandma. "Grand Annie had Steadfast love."

Steadfast love! Those are God words. We use those words in church to describe God. She used them to describe her grandma who was one working in the vineyard. She went on to say, "Being the youngest of three, my parents began to be empty nesters prematurely, but Grand Annie and Grandpa opened their doors to me, whether a weekend, a week, or a whole month. Even in my moody teenage years, Grand Annie gave me space to be myself, loving me through every stage without hesitation."

She said, "I remember a time being sick and overwhelmed in a bathtub without the energy to even move. Definitely too old to need help in the bathtub. Grand Annie appeared and, without judgment, gently, gently, gently... bathed me and helped get me up."

Of all the days in the vineyard, this young woman remembered that one as being priceless. How much did that cost that Grand Annie? How hard is it to go to work in the vineyard and find that your job is to love the moody teenager? And do you think that young woman will without judgment gently... gently...gently... give herself away to make a day worth it?

What's in it for me? No... no... no... it's not what it is about. We know this! I heard it in this very room from the lips of another granddaughter who gained her independence and took 'the wings of the morning and traveled to the farthest limits of the sea,' living on an island in the Pacific. Free! On her own! A complete unknown. Shaved her head. What's life about? Sun

and sea. And then, “You get a letter of ‘steadfast love’ from Grand Annie that says, ‘You cannot hide your beauty and loveliness with an ugly mohawk. It is all yours to do as it pleases you, as it should be. It must be easy to take care of. I only wish that I could have all that hair that you don’t want to fool with. We really missed you over Christmas. But we know that you are happy.’” How many times did that young woman read that letter?

“We really missed you over Christmas, but we know that you are happy.” The steadfast loving calling out to the prodigal... “I love you! I miss you... I know you are happy. I love you... I miss you... I know you are happy!

Of all the days in the vineyard, she remembered that one. She held on to that one. Read it to everyone....

Do you think there might be a day when that young woman will reach out in truth and grace and say to the one half a world away, “You’re beautiful... I miss you! Not the same without you! I know you’re happy. I know you’re living your best life. I know!”

We do this work in the vineyard for those whom we love. We know this. We are quick to sacrifice for those whom we love. Without thought. It’s not about us! It’s about you! All of you will be remembered by friends and family for those times when you gave it all away. That’s the work of the vineyard.

We just need to work on the size of the vineyard. Jesus says “Go ye into all the world.” Jesus says, “You know how to do it... you have taste for it... just see that there’s more work to do.” And it’s so worth it!

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