

“The Original Wonder Bread”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 24, 2023 - Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 20
[Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16](#)

This morning, auto workers are on strike at 38 different manufacturing facilities across 20 states. And in Hollywood, actors and writers are also now on strike, as they have been for several weeks. In both cases, workers seek to renegotiate with employers the terms of their agreements. I doubt that in either of these cases, or in any other labor dispute between workers and those who employ them, terms coming anywhere close to those described by Jesus in his parable about the laborers in the vineyard would be sought or agreed to by any parties involved for the terms are completely ridiculous and utterly unfair.

As we just heard in the lesson from the gospel of Matthew, the labor deal offered by the owner of the vineyard to workers was for them to begin working at the start of the day and to receive a denarius, or an average full day's pay, at the end of it. Fair enough. But then the vineyard owner employed additional workers who started a couple hours later, and then more workers who started a couple hours after those, and then more who started in the afternoon, and then more who began working just an hour before the workday ended for all. The terms of employment offered by the vineyard owner to all of these workers were ridiculous and unfair, though, because all of the workers received the same full day's pay for their work, even if they had only worked for just a few hours or even one. This unfair arrangement was unheard of in Jesus' day (or in other times), and it is in the vineyard owner's extraordinary, surprising actions of that we are given an important lesson about God and living as God's people.

We are taught that God, like the landowner, calls people, like the laborers, to be in fellowship with God and to be busy doing God's work in the world, and no matter when people receive that call or respond to it, whether it is at the beginning of their day, or the beginning of their lives, they will be compensated just the same as those who respond to it later in the day or even at the end of their lives. All those who respond to God's call to gather in the vineyard and do God's work will be blessed, regardless of when they came or how they got there.

They are blessed, just the same, with God's generous gifts of love and abundant and unending life.

We are also given a lesson on God's ridiculously generous provision of love and life in our first reading from the book of Exodus, which tells the story of God's provision of manna and quails for the Israelites to sustain them as they journeyed through the desert wilderness after escaping from bondage in Egypt. God did the work of providing generously for all, offering from heaven each day the original wonder bread, but the people had to do their part by using less of their energy to complain about their situation and more of it to go out and gather up what was freely given so that they could feed themselves and their families.

This work arrangement in the wilderness was completely different from the one that the Israelites experienced in Egypt. There they toiled away for Pharaoh, laboring each day against their will to make bricks for the ruler's self-glorifying building projects. But in the wilderness, freed from bondage in Egypt, they were to work in partnership with a loving God to take care of themselves and one another. The old arrangement in Egypt brought only sorrow and death to the Israelites as their enslavers reaped the benefits of their labor while enjoying for themselves the abundance of a fertile land. The new labor agreement in the wilderness, however, offered the Hebrew people life and hope even as they wandered in a dry and inhospitable place.

Like the labor agreement of the parable of the vineyard workers, the one between the Israelites and God doesn't seem fair at all, for in it God did most of the working, faithfully blessing the people with food each day, and all the people had to do is go out and gather up God's generously provided gifts. But God specializes in crafting labor deals that unfairly demonstrate God's amazing generosity: God works, and we are blessed.

Can we be so unfairly generous with others? Or will we give to others only in kind with what we may receive? Or, even worse, will we be takers and hoarders of God's gifts, freely receiving the blessings of God, but acting stingily with our God-given wealth?

Our calling, as children of a ridiculously generous God, is to be like God, our heavenly parent, in this way, generously giving to others as we have been blessed. Maybe we can't make bread wondrously rain down from heaven, but we can

partner with God by gathering up what we do have and sharing it with others. Maybe we can't give perfectly the extravagant welcome that God perfectly gives us, but we can try by extending our hospitality to people in our community and by striving to live more perfectly into our welcome statement. Maybe we can't offer abundant life as God offers to all of us in the vineyard, but we can offer that which makes life flourish in others -- kind words that increase life, actions that promote peace, forgiveness that inspires others to forgive, and all kinds of work that moves us to becoming a more just society.

This is the labor that God calls us to today. Let us claim it and labor on that God may rain down something new and wonderful in the world through us. Amen.