**Gospel**: Matthew 20:1-16

“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 the usual daily wage, 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.’ 9When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, ‘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.’ 13But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

**Message**: The Privilege of Believing

Back in the early 1970’s PL94-142 was passed establishing mandatory provisions in the education system for students with special needs. One piece of the law was to provide for certain test modifications which included extended time, special location away from distractions, test questions read, a scribe for essays, tests reformatted to fit learning styles. Occasionally a teacher would have another teacher or student claim that those modifications weren’t fair to the other students; it gave them an unfair advantage. OK then you take your test, or teachers write lesson plans, without your glasses and write with your non-dominant hand. Education is not a competition; it is an opportunity to learn—not just facts and stuff, but learn how to learn using individual areas of strength, and how best to utilize the knowledge one gains in order to be productive in society. Fair/Just and grace are held in tension. Let us not lose sight of our mission.

Jesus’ parable exemplifies this tension. We ask, “can we fully know/understand God’s justice?” No more than we can fully understand God. As the Jewish population of the time, might have heard it, justice is through the Law. The Law was inspired by God, but written by humans, who don’t always get things right when listening to God or anyone else for that matter. Roman Christians adhered to the power of *works righteousness*. We **are** here to serve, yet often our work gets in the way of our worship. Then rises the cry from the workers that 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people. Ask what those other 80% are doing outside of the church; they very well may be in a form of mission that is not part of the church program. BUT, wherever we are, we ARE Church, proclaiming the love of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus insists that salvation comes **only** by God’s grace.

The early morning workers are hired at an agreed upon wage—one denarius. It was a very low wage offered to the very poor that would support one person for one day. It was not a living wage. The other laborers who where hired as the day went on were offered work with the “promise of reward.” No specific payment was offered or agreed upon. The laborers were vulnerable to the largess/magnanimity or lack thereof of the landlord. Jesus, in this parable, **was** illustrating the generosity of God, the importance of grace at the 11th hour for salvation, **but** he was also, and perhaps specifically, illustrating the social and economic conflict of the time, **particularly** the economic terrors suffered by most of the population. Terrors that continue to surround us daily.

Terrors and conflict come not only from the elite who attempt to bind social mobility and freedoms, but also from among the workers. The laborers who had been hired first thing in the morning and did 80% of the work got side-tracked, forgetting that they actually had work AND pay. They became mired in an assumption based on the way things were/are. They had an idea of the outcome, but were supremely disappointed when their assumption didn’t turn out as planned. (Have you ever met anyone who seemed to be angry at every one and every thing? Life just doesn’t go according to their plan. Always the complaint.) Envy, jealousy, selfishness moved into their thoughts of what they saw as inequity. Today is no different. Rather than celebrating the good fortune of a fellow human who has discovered her/his gift, late in life or not, has worked perhaps harder than others to achieve, we criticize, slander or slur the achievements of others (or the person), which sorely diminishes us and our own gifts. All our gifts, talents, abilities, possessions, social status, achievements are gifts from God. Celebration of each other’s gifts enhances one’s own gifts. (St. Benedict: *Try to see others in the best possible light*. Sometimes we have to look quite deep with a really bright light.) We begin to work in concert for the betterment of all. Turning from anger, grudges and resentment to gratitude and joy develops hearts of faith, trusting in God.

Paul is facing execution; the situation looks dire. Writing to the Philippians, he is expressing his anxieties while arguing with himself. **If I die, I go to be with Christ**. That’s what he really wants. Why not? Isn’t that the goal? Oh, to be face to face with Jesus! We might think he’s taking the easy way out. He’d rather die than remain in prison. It’s a somewhat selfish scenario. If he lives, he continues to work for the progress of others in their faith journey, proclaiming the gospel even if it is through his letters and the goodness of those helping him. Which way is better? He sighs, “I don’t know.” (We’ve all experienced that internal discussion.) Then quickly asks, “**Better for whom**?” In that question—better for whom—is the crux of the parable, the center piece of Jonah’s complaint, the heart of Paul’s hymn.

When people lose hope they lose the will to live. The reality of heaven **is** a source of comfort when facing personal threat. However, the threat also heightens our desire to live. Paul lets us know that we all have struggles, we all suffer one way or another. We live with the courage given through the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. To live is to love, and love animates life. Love inspires life. Love enlivens life. We live **in** Christ. We suffer **for** Christ. Our living **IS** Christ. I smile when people say they aren’t religious, but they are spiritual. I’ve never asked what they mean by that. Next time!!! Spirituality (our relationship/communication, God—in whom we live and move and have our being. God is not a passing thought.), the welfare of our soul, our salvation, are a gift, which delights in what is best for others. Spirituality and salvation are tools to be used to assist others. Living for Christ is unity of spirit and soul that creates fellowship (*koinonia*)--fellowship with Christ and with others, and in that fellowship, Christ is exalted in our bodies. In addition, courageously living **in** Christ, suffering **for** Christ is a positive warning sign to those who are living in destruction. Doing the works of Christ especially for the ungrateful and disappointed **is** Christ.

For those who are disgruntled and disappointed in an unfulfilled assumption, existing with anger and resentment, here are a few assumptions that tip the scale toward God’s mercy. Live boldly, serve gratefully from t**hese** assumptions:

1. God loves **me** and **all** creation beyond my comprehension

2. I and **all** others are made in the image of God.

3. God’s generosity is beyond measure.

4. There is **nothing** I can do to earn or deserve God’s love.

The privilege of believing is being Christ to others. Period! The Lord be with you. Amen.

**Prayers of the People/the Lord’s Prayer**: Eternal God, you lead us into the blessedness of the mystery of communion with you. We bow our spirits before you in deepest reverence as you lift us into kinship with you and creation. Send the Spirit of Christ into our hearts to banish all fear, all jealousy, and replace it with the gladness of your perfect love that we may serve with cheerfulness that warms the chilled hearts of the discouraged. Help us to rise to holy communion with you through Jesus the Christ who continues to teach us to pray, “Our Father . . .”

**Benediction**: The love of God, the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit be with you and enliven you now and forever. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: Accept our morning offering, O Lord; especially accept our offering of praise, for our hearts are filled with gratitude. You have given us priceless blessings in your loving care. Grant that we may work with less friction, enjoy your more perfect peace and have freer use of all your power as we go forward in our belief and in our faith for the life that is Christ. May your blessings enliven us and these gifts we offer this day as we go into our days of service for you.

**Old Testament**: Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

4But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

5Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. 6The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” 9But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” 10Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

**New Testament**: Philippians 1:20-30

It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.

21For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

27Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. 29For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— 30since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.