

Sermon Sept. 20, 2026

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. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And 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?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

When 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 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.'

But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; 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?'

So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

grace measured in morning light

The wilderness teaches us things we would never choose to learn. Israel has barely begun their journey toward freedom when the hunger hits. Hunger that is unsettling and too real. The sharp kind of hunger that gnaws deep into your body and soul. Suddenly Egypt looks good again. Oppression and slavery wasn't that bad... at least they had food in their bellies and a bed to lay their heads. Trauma has a way of rewriting memory, making the past seem safer than the uncertain present.

God hears their cries and does not shame them for their fear. God answers with bread... bread that arrives with the dawn. Enough bread to go around. But, it cannot be hoarded. This sacred bread spoils if you try to turn it into security. You have to have faith that there will be more as tomorrow's dawn rises. Manna is grace measured in morning light: enough for today, enough for each person, enough without earning it. A gift that teaches the heart to trust. Bread that sustained them through a 40-year journey.

We meet the same God and the same grace in Jesus' story today. A landowner hires workers throughout the day. Everyone has a chance: early risers, mid-morning stragglers, noon arrivals, late-afternoon wanderers. At day's end, he pays them all the same. The ones who worked longest are furious, and we can understand why. "It's not fair! You gave them the same amount and we worked harder!" they say. We hear echoes of children arguing. It's an age old cry: "It's not fair!" This is not about wages; it is about what they are worth. When we work hard, we want to get credit... especially when some people don't seem to be pulling their own weight. It is so easy to believe that some people deserve more because they have done more. Worked harder. Pulled themselves up by their boot straps.

But the landowner looks at this situation differently: "I gave you exactly what I promised you. Are you envious because I am generous?" Our God is an awesome God who offers true justice, even when it seems unfair.

The manna in the wilderness and the wages in the vineyard offer a glimpse into a divine economy that refuses the ideas of scarcity or meritocracy. It pushes us to reject the myth that we must earn God's love. Grace is not a paycheck or a ranking system or a competition.

Grace is gift.

Dorothy Day understood this gift of grace. Born in 1897, she was a journalist, suffragist and social activist. She lived her life in the tension between human expectations of fairness and God's radical generosity. She joined the Catholic Worker Movement and co-founded several houses of hospitality that continue to thrive today. She welcomed people who arrived early and greeted people who arrived late. She served those who had worked hard and those who had been broken by life. There was a place for people who contributed and those who consumed, people who were sober and people who struggled with addiction.

She fed them all.

Dorothy Day said, "The Gospel takes away our right forever to discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving poor." She knew that grace measured in morning light is not about who earned the most. It is about who needs the most. It is about the God who gives without calculating.

Dorothy Day's life was a living parable of the vineyard: she refused to keep score or decide who was worthy of bread, shelter, or dignity. She believed that generosity should not be rationed... that love... real love... was about justice not fairness. And her legacy is the lives changed in her loving presence.

And isn't that the scandal of grace? God gives us what we need, not what we deserve. Our God meets us in the wilderness with bread. And our God meets us at the end of the day with a full wage. God meets us in our lateness, our weariness, our failures, our fears... and calls us beloved.

Grace measured in morning light is not about fairness. It is about abundance. It is based on a reality when there is more than enough to go around. We wake up to discover that God has already been here and left us what we need for the day. We trust that there will be enough tomorrow, even if we cannot see it yet, and we learn to live by gift not grasping.

It is not a duty to help Christ, Dorothy wrote, it a privilege. If that is the way they gave hospitality to Christ, it is certain that that is the way it should still be given. Not for the sake of humanity. Not because it might be Christ

who stays with us, comes to see us, takes up our time. Not because these people remind us of Christ... but because they are Christ, asking us to find room for Him, exactly as He did at the first Christmas.

Dorothy Day used to say that the world will be saved by beauty. She lifts up the beauty of generosity, shared bread... the beauty of a community where no one is first and no one is last because everyone is fed.

God gives us manna in the wilderness. God gives us wages in the vineyard. Throughout our lives, God gives grace that is measured not by merit, but by love. May we learn to receive God's gracious love. May we learn to trust it. May we learn to share it, morning by morning, light by light. Amen