We continue this morning in our sermon series entitled, "Thanks-Living: Parables of Stewardship." Today's parable comes- again this week- from the Gospel writer, Matthew. Parables, as you know, were part of Jesus' teachings. They are stories that are open to interpretation and slippery when it comes to direct answers. Pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, offers this advice about reading Scripture: "Don't start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks." He goes on to say; "When you hear the question that is your question, then you have already begun to hear much" (*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*). This parable is absurd, and it is unique to Matthew. True to form, it has had many, many different interpretations over the years. Much like the Parable of the Prodigal Son, some of us may find ourselves upset just hearing today's parable. While others, may hear it literally and think of going down Poinsett at 3:30AM to the Day Laborers place to try and find a job for the day. Wherever you find yourself in today's parable, I want to invite us to look at the context and the placement of today's parable, as Matthew's placement was significant. "In the preceding story, Peter claimed, 'we have left everything and followed you' (19:27). This kind of dedicated service to Jesus will reap a reward (cf. 19:28), but these rewards are not just for the immediate disciples but for all who have followed, since 'many who are first will be last' (19:30). In like manner, in this week's story, special privileges were downplayed. The parable also played out in the story that followed the parable (21:17-28) where Jesus predicted his death to the disciples for the third and final time. Right after his prediction, the mother of James and John requested special privileges for her sons as

they, too, 'have borne the burden of the day' since they've been with Jesus from the beginning of his mission" (Emerson Powery, workingpreacher.org). Notice that I haven't given the name of this parable. That is because I wonder how we would read this parable if instead of it being named, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, it was named the parable of the Generous Landowner?! Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Confession: I have a competitive spirit. One of my earliest memories with my paternal grandfather, Paw Paw, is of being introduced to the game, Monopoly. He taught me to play at a very young age, and he taught me to win by applying his strategy: buy up all the cheaper properties first, as there are more of them on the board and then buy out every other player. Every change he could, he would tell me stories of how to make a buck. My dad, an only child and a pastor, would become angry with his father at "filling my head with that nonsense." I don't know if a competitive spirit is something innate or learned? But I digress. When reading this parable, I'm sure many of us- whether street wise and/or college educated, know that the way this landowner operates is no way to make a buck. This is bad business, fuzzy math and flat-out unfair. In the world we know, time plus effort equals production, and production equals pay. You clock in and are paid until you clock out. Those who are in the most demand, the hardest workers with the highest skills, deserve the first and greatest reward. That's what we learn whether on the street or in Economy 101. However, God's economy is different from ours.

The disciples in Jesus' day more than likely had a similar mindset to us. I bet the fisherman among them surely didn't operate the way the landowner does here. Who has ever heard of a landowner who would even come to the marketplace once a day and not send their manager, let alone return FIVE times in a day to pick up workers for his vineyard. How crazy is that?! What a waste of the landowner's time and time is money! Or would the disciples have heard this parable as the vineyard representing the land of Israel and the landowner as representing God?! Regardless of which, I imagine as they listened, they were looking at Jesus like he had two heads- perplexed and confused by what Jesus was saying. Welcome to the club. I'm sorry, God, but whether you are the landowner in today's story or not, fair is fair. After all, we know how the world is supposed to work. Fairness is a concept that is deeply rooted in the human psyche. Equal pay for unequal work is unfair. Period. How many times have I heard my parent's voices coming out of mouth when I respond to my child's, "That is so unfair!," "Well, life is unfair." Let's go ahead and just name it. If indeed the landowner in this parable represents God, then God is not fair. "At least not according to our cherished beliefs about fairness. This God, it turns out, does not believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. He isn't interested, as we so often are, in showing favor to the best and the biggest and the brightest- the workers with the most elite educations, astonishing professional achievements, or fanciest zip codes. This God is not obsessed with who deserves what. In fact, this God doesn't even ask why some workers were able to start at dawn and others were not. All that he's obsessed with is making sure that every last person gets a

place in God's vineyard- the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten. Why *did* some laborers end up unemployed until 5pm? The parable is very clear: *because no one would hire them.* It's not that they were idle, as some translations say. It's that they were unable to secure work that day. Perhaps they weren't as literate, educated, or skilled as their competition. Perhaps they had children to care for at home. Maybe they had transportation difficulties or don't have an ID? Maybe they struggle with chronic depression or debilitating anxiety or other mental health challenges? Maybe they were disabled, or didn't have green cards, or suffered discrimination? Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask these laborers to defend themselves. He fulfills his promise and also makes sure that every worker ends the day with the dignity and security of a living wage/daily bread" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net).

Notice that Jesus begins the parable with "the kingdom of God is like…" Jesus isn't talking about how the world operates. He's talking about what it is like in the kingdom of God- whether in heaven or on earth. And as far as what Jesus tells us about the kingdom of God, it is pretty upside-down compared to the ways of the world in which we live. However, as followers of Jesus, once we see what God's kingdom looks like, we can try and emulate it. Or can we? I think it's fair to say (pun intended) that "this parable reads very differently if you situate yourself at the end of the line. The workers who got more than they expected to- the ones who received twelve times the pay they knew they deserved- the ones ecstatic at the end of their workday- the ones whose

experience was an utter blessing" (Thomas). Ultimately, the workers who showed up early in the day don't inspire admiration; however they speak truth to how some of us can feel. They resent that the landowner has given everyone the same wage. And they begrudge the workers who showed up late: "*Why them? Why not us?* They assumed because they worked longer, they would be paid more. Those are dangerous assumptions. As a matter of fact, there's this saying that "assumptions are planned resentments." You know the other saying, right? When one assumes, they make a behind (other word for it) out of you and me?! There it is: *envy*. Jesus didn't even have to put the word in the landowner's mouth because it is so obvious. The disciples who, just a short time ago, might have secretly rejoiced when Jesus sent the rich guy away, now find themselves on the back foot. Surely they identified more with workers being treated unjustly than a landowner sharing his cash with abandon to those who showed up late. *Why them? Why not us" (Bass)?* "I am not being unjust to you," the landowner said, "did you not agree to this wage? Take what is yours and go; but I wish to give to the last workers what I also give to you." ***Are you envious because I am generous?*** Ahhh…now there's a question to either ignore or to ponder. Did you know that when you translate the Greek it really reads, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" In other words, "Are you giving me the stink eye because I'm good?" ***Are you envious because I am generous?,*** the landowner asks. In her book *Reading Jesus,* Mary Gordon calls this "an impossible question, calling for an impossible honesty." Because yes, she writes: "I *am* envious because you are generous. I am envious

because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone got away with something.
Envy has eaten out my heart." "I appreciate Gordon's candor, because really, if this parable doesn't offend us at least a little bit, then we're not paying attention. Perhaps, if God's generosity offends us so much, it's because we don't have eyes to see where we actually stand in the line of God's overflowing grace and kindness" (Thomas). Let's face it! God's grace is offensive!

I find it interesting that the landowner insisted on paying the workers in reverse order, thereby ensuring that the first workers saw what the last workers received- the same as them for much less work! Seems to me that the landowner could have avoided this altogether by paying the all-day laborers first, sending them on their way, before paying the latecomers. It's as if the landowner wanted them all to see what kind of vineyard he ran?! This parable suggests that in the economy of God's kingdom there is something better than profit margin, greater than incentive and reward, more beautiful than a sharply run business- and this is abundant grace. In the economy of God's grace those who are hired at the very end, those whom no one selected for work, are the closest to God's heart. They are the first recipients of God's generosity. In God's economy of grace the last are placed first in line. Perhaps the landowner wanted those who worked all day to experience radical generosity- to surrender their envy and join in on the celebration?! They couldn't celebrate because they were too miffed and offended. They couldn't take satisfaction in their hours of good work. They couldn't

delight in the fruit of the vineyard. What got in the way of them seeing? What made them give the stink eye? Several weeks ago we preached on enemies of gratitude. Envy wasn't one we mentioned, but it very much can be an enemy of gratitude. Author and Church Historian, Diana Butler Bass, says that "envy is *not* jealousy. Jealousy is a kind of protective impulse. Envy is resentment, a passionate spite that can become cancerous hostility" (*The Cottage e-newsletter).* Envy drives us to have more, to take what we think we deserve, to beat others at the game. God may promise provision, that each one sit under the vine and fig tree, but we can't enjoy the abundance of our own vine without wanting our neighbor's vineyard. Envy destroys our capacity for gratitude- and fixates our being on that nagging, horrible question: *Why them? Why not me" (Bass)?* Yes, envy "is the great leveler: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down. At its best, envy is a climber and a snob; at its worst it is a destroyer- rather than have anyone happier than itself, it will see us all miserable together" (Dorothy Sayers, 1941 essay, "The Other Deadly Sins"). Envy isn't just a personal sin. It is one of shared consequences, a communal deadly sin. "Envy drives us to elevate ourselves over others by either beating them at the game or beating others down. The landowner's question, *Are you envious because I am generous?-* calls us to remember that we are all recipients of a wild generosity" (Bass). "Could it be any more obvious that we- all of us, every single one of us- are wholly dependent on each other for our survival and well-being? That what's 'fair' for me isn't good enough if it leaves you in the darkness to die? That my sense of 'justice' is not just if it mocks the tender, weeping heart of God? That the vineyards of God's

kingdom only thrive when everyone- everyone- has a place of dignity and purpose within them? Are we willing to let go of the stink eye in order to see it? Are we willing to live it" (Thomas)? Manna that falls like rain; water in the desert; lilies of the field- *the gifts of God for all the people of God.* Envy inhibits gratitude. However, the reverse is also true: gratitude is an antidote to envy. And perhaps that is the central point of Jesus' little story. Life in the kingdom of God isn't a competition. There are no winners or losers in God's generosity, there is simply grace. Gratitude begins when we stop keeping score. Being grateful changes how we see others. Gratitude becomes generosity. *Are you envious because I am generous?* In God's economy, God's generosity will not succumb to human envy. As Matthew's Jesus preached earlier, God provides rain for the just and unjust alike (5:45). ***Are you envious because God is generous?*** "Listen for the questions. When you hear the question that is your question, then you have already begun to hear much" (Thomas)- maybe also to see and then receive and give thanks. Amen.