### “The Daily Wage” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 24, 2023

**Philippians 1:21–26**

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.

**Matthew 20:1–16**

1“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 market-place; 4and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard. . .’ 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.”

Jesus challenges our way of thinking about salvation in this parable. He says that even the last-minute arrivers receive the same wages as the long-time workers. This means that even last-minute converts make it into the kingdom with the same status and reward as the long-time faithful.

Jesus knows full well that we will tend to sympathize with the workers who started early in the day, and who are disgruntled about not receiving more than the newly hired workers. This is fully reasonable, from a *material* point of view, certainly from an hourly wage point of view.

It is not *sinful* that we think that way, but it is our material nature that makes us do so. Jesus, however, wants to train us to think *spiritually*, and to do that, he needs to get us worked up! This story arouses our emotions and our sense of justice, even outrage. Jesus *deliberately* arouses sharp feelings in us, in the hope that they may help us become hungry for a solution. Our sense of injustice is only relieved when we come to realize that spiritual reality works *entirely differently* from material reality.

Jesus often tells parables that are meant to shake us up, to make us think. Here he asks us to rethink what we believe about heaven or the afterlife. And certainly we should rethink any notion we have of *earning* our way into heaven the way we earn wages, or earn a pension, here on earth. The afterlife is a gift, not a payment.

Jesus uses the image of wages in this story because that is how we *already* tend to think about the afterlife. But the story busts that image wide open. It shows us that the *wages* image does not work, because salvation is a *gift*. It is admission to a future life that is freely offered, and in the *same way* to everyone, without being accompanied by status or earnings or rights. It is a gratuitous admission to a new world, the spiritual world. God awards everlasting life equally to all who want it, nor should we begrudge recent converts. As the landowner in the parable asks, “are you envious because I am generous?” (Matt 20:15).

Now I *do* think that people will have different speeds of growth, different styles of spiritual expression, and different aspects of God that they will appreciate, just as they do here. But this is not equivalent to different wages; it’s just different *pacing* and *style* of growth.

We really cannot understand heaven if we project our materialistic ways of thinking upon it. We should return to Jesus’ own chosen image of *family*, God as a loving parent, and all our fellows as brothers and sisters, growing within the same family. *Growth*, not just desserts, is the bottom line. *Admittance*, not status, is what you need.

Don’t be envious of the late arrivers, newcomers to the church, or new converts to the message of Jesus. You might as well resent new children as they are being born into the world. Just be happy to have new friends. Don’t seek higher position and recognition.

We also have a short reading from the last letter of Paul the Apostle. He was under arrest when he wrote it, and would eventually be put to death at the order of the Emperor Nero. But first he lived fairly comfortably under house arrest, receiving visitors and writing letters. Here he gives a very personal message showing his readiness either to depart and be with the Lord, or to continue living on earth, where he could further serve his fellows.

He is not at all bitter about being under arrest and possibly near death; he is not anxious about it. He knows he will be able to contribute to believers’ “progress and joy in faith” (Phil 1:25), and that is what really matters. Again, we see that *growth* is the theme: “progress and joy.” Growth is the key to many of Jesus’ sayings. It lies behind the image of bearing fruit, which he often used. It is the message given in Mark 4 about grain growing, “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (4:28).

We think of growth here on this earth, too, but we often think of it as growth in money and status. We are shocked to hear that those mean nothing. All that matters in the long run is spiritual growth. That’s the *real* “wherewithal,” the wherewithal to live and make progress in God’s realm.

Are you envious because God is generous? No way! Are you envious because there are newcomers who haven’t been studying to follow Jesus for very long? I hope not. Are you hoping God will take note of your many years as a Christian, and of your good deeds? Fair enough, but don’t let envy or desire for special status creep in.

Remember that the point is always growth, and wherever you are on the path, there’s always more room for growth. Finitude never reaches infinity, so there will always be growth. Some goals will take a long time to reach. But there’s no hurry when you have forever! Think of that great gift: an eternity of growth and experience lies ahead for us.