

September 20, 2026
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus told his disciples this parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. Going out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.' So they went off. And he went out again around noon, and around three o'clock, and did likewise. Going out about five o'clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They answered, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard.' When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.' When those who had started about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage. So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat.' He said to one of them in reply, 'My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?' Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Background:

Last Sunday the Gospel was the familiar but difficult parable of the servant who had been forgiven a great debt but refused to forgive his fellow servant (Matthew 18:21-35). In selecting the Gospel text for this Sunday, the Church passed over the 19th chapter of Matthew's Gospel and selected the parable that opens the 20th chapter.

In order to appreciate how Matthew is unfolding his Gospel, it is helpful to be aware of the material that was passed over in the 19th chapter. The chapter begins with Jesus departing from Galilee and entering Judea. Great crowds follow him, and he heals many. The Pharisees, in order to test him, ask if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus' response challenges the accepted practice of the day. Then Matthew records an occasion when children are brought to Jesus for a blessing. The disciples rebuke Jesus, but he rejects their criticism. Next, a man approaches Jesus asking what must be done to possess eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, but, if he wants to be perfect, he should sell everything and give the proceeds to the poor. This leads the disciples to ask, "Who can be saved?" Peter then asks what they would receive for having left everything to follow him. Jesus' response indicates that "everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more and will inherit eternal life. Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first (Matthew 19:29-30)."

While the 20th chapter begins by stating that Jesus addresses the parable to the disciples, Matthew has placed it in the context of Peter's questions about what they can expect to receive for having left everything to become his followers.

The Gospel text for today twice contains a reference to the last being first and the first being last. At the end of the parable, the owner summons the foreman and tells him, "Give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first (Matthew 20:8)." This theme appears again in the last verse of the text, and it is also found in the other Gospels. In Mark, Jesus instructs the twelve: "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35)." Later, when the rich young man comes to Jesus asking what he needs to do to enter eternal life, Jesus tells the disciples that, although it is impossible for humans, entering eternal life is not impossible for God. "But many that are first will be last, and the last will be first (Mark 10:31)." Luke also records Jesus teaching this same message. When asked by someone in a crowd about how many will be saved, Jesus likens the Reign of God to a master of a house who locks the door, and then others come and call from the outside to be admitted. But the Reign of God will be filled with those who come from the farthest ends of the world. "For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last (Luke 13:30)." Because

this theme is found in all three synoptic Gospels, it is likely that it was an important part of Jesus' own teaching, and significant for the early Christian community.

As Jesus told the parable that is today's Gospel text, it probably functioned as way to respond to those who objected to Jesus because he seemed to focus his ministry and attention on the crowds and those who did not keep the religious traditions. Many of these were the day laborers of that time. Not attached to any family as servants or even as slaves, these laborers' families were dependent every day on them finding work if they were to eat that day. Jesus' parable reflects a God whose compassion and generosity are without limits, and not reserved only for those who are the chosen or the obedient. The parable represents a God who goes out and seeks workers and treats them as one would treat a family member; they receive a full portion for their labor. Such an image was very different from their image of a God who required ritual purity or had chosen people.

For the first Christians who retold this parable, the meaning shifted, as they saw themselves responding to the invitation to go into the vineyard, even when it meant being rejected by family and community. However, some of them did not persevere. Being first in the Kingdom of God lost its appeal next to the hardship of rejection. It was a daily struggle to maintain a way of life that was counter to the cultural tradition where the people thought of themselves as chosen people. The early Christians connected particularly with the conclusion of the parable.

Consider the context, as this parable of Jesus is written and incorporated into the Gospel. It takes on new meaning, because, in general, the Jews were not accepting the message of the Gospel. The idea that "the first will be last and the last will be first" took on further significance. At this stage of development, the Jewish and Gentile Christians both found meaning in the conclusion of the parable. They would see themselves as those who were to receive the same reward and be equal in the eyes of God.

Today we are fortunate to be able to have the insight into the dynamic way God is speaking, through the teaching of Jesus and through this parable. Biblical scholars help us appreciate how God is present in the scriptures, calling each generation into an authentic relationship with our God.

Reflection Questions:

1. How is your experience of someone looking for employment different from what is being described in this parable?
2. How would your life be different if every day you had to look for employment for that day?
3. What do you think it was like to be a laborer waiting all day to be hired, and not be hired as the day begins to gradually come to an end?
4. The workers object to what the owner did, because he has made those hired later in the day equal to those hired at the beginning of the day. Do you have a need to feel that you are special, and significant in the eyes of another, and to God? Have you ever talked with God about those feelings and that need?
5. At the end of the parable, the question is asked of those who are disappointed, are they envious? Are you aware of times when you have been envious of others? How does envy affect you, and how you feel about yourself when you experience it?
6. Can you take some time to talk with God about when you experience God as being generous, and about your own generosity? You also may want to talk with God about some other issue that arose within you from this parable.

The Gospel background and reflection questions are prepared and distributed by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel, as edited from Reflections authored by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for September 20, 2026, the Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near.
Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked his thoughts;
let him turn to the Lord for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways
and my thoughts above your thoughts.

The Lord is near to all who call upon him.
Every day will I bless you, and I will praise your name forever and ever.
Great is the Lord and highly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.
The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness.
The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.
The Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his works.
The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth.

Brothers and sisters: Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.
For to me life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.
And I do not know which I shall choose. I am caught between the two.
I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better.
Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit.
Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

Jesus told his disciples this parable:
"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.
After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
Going out about nine o'clock, the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace,
and he said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.'
So they went off. And he went out again around noon, and around three o'clock, and did likewise.
Going out about five o'clock, the landowner found others standing around, and said to them,
'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They answered, 'Because no one has hired us.'
He said to them, 'You too go into my vineyard.'
When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman,
'Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.'

When those who had started about five o'clock came, each received the usual daily wage.
When the first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage.
And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat.'
He said to one of them in reply, 'My friend, I am not cheating you.
Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what is yours and go.
What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? Am I not free to do as I wish with my own money?
Are you envious because I am generous?' Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Excerpts from Isaiah 55:6-9; Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18; Philippians 1:20-24, 27; and Matthew 20:1-16