

Not Fair. Thank Goodness!

Bob Stillerman

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16

9-27-2026



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. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6 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?’ 7 They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8 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.’ 9 When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received a denarius. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 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.’ 13 But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’[a] 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Sermon: Not Fair. Thank Goodness!

We all love to be on the receiving end of generosity. But it’s amazing how many conditions we place on it. We want our fair share and not a penny more.

Not Fair. Thank Goodness!

Bob Stillerman

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16

9-27-2026



Think about the things we buy. A smart phone. A hotel room. A plane ticket. We do our research. We pay a fair price. You'd think we'd be satisfied. But then we watch a football game on television, or however we consume our media, and are served with dozens of ads that make us think twice. Look at all those smart phones. Bigger, better, cheaper. We get on an airplane or stay at the Holiday Inn, and we wonder if the person in the seat next to us, or the room down the hall paid \$10 less? The purchasing app said we got a "great deal," even put it in bold green letters. ALL CAPS, too! GREAT DEAL!!!

Maybe we accepted a new job. Good pay. Good benefits. Good balance. Then we learn Larry in Purchasing makes more than us, has more PTO, and never comes in early or stays late. And can we just ask, "What does Larry actually do?" Because it sure doesn't seem like much. You know what? This isn't fair. They should pay us more!

2026 isn't far-removed from the vineyards of first-century Palestine. Day laborers complain about fairness, too. They want full wages for full days and partial wages for partial days. They want the system to work like it's supposed to, just like they've been taught.

If we rush through today's text, we might insist upon interpreting it as allegory rather than parable. God is the vineyard owner. The laborers are saints and sinners. Be grateful for God's generosity. Move on to the next chapter.

But Jesus offers parables, not simple stories. Two weeks ago, he lamented an economy that valued commodities over people. Today, he does it again. He asks us where we find our value and how we distribute our resources.

Not Fair. Thank Goodness!

Bob Stillerman

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16

9-27-2026



Genesis makes clear our value. Every person is created in the image of God. Every person is called good. Very good. Scripture never says God created billionaires and millionaires and middle class and poor. God created resources. Humanity created systems that hoard resources. And labels that reflect that hoarding.

Jesus knows this. Notice the phrase *standing idle*. The vineyard owner or employer sees people standing idle or asks why they are standing idle. These workers are not lazy, or idle, or sitting still. They have walked miles to stand in line for the chance to work. Their muscles ache. Their minds race. They wonder how they ended up unemployed and dependent upon the generosity of others. They wonder what they will tell their families when there are no wages again. They wonder how many more tomorrows they can make new promises to their disappointed children. They are scraping and scrapping for the chance to simply scrape by.

I picture the bread lines of the Great Depression. No one would call those people idle.

The vineyard owner's question feels callous. He offers work, which is good. But he is also one of the few who can provide work. The owner profits from a system that gives privilege to wealth. He plays the role of benevolent enforcer. He controls everything. He controls the wages. He controls the resources. He even controls the idleness.

I imagine the laborers grinding their teeth when he asks why they are idle. I imagine Jesus' listeners grinding theirs, too. Many of them were day laborers. They knew the distance between wealth and

Not Fair. Thank Goodness!

Bob Stillerman

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16

9-27-2026



subsistence. They expected the owner to act like every other owner. Dock the pay. Count the hours. Reward the early. Punish the late.

Then the owner surprises them. He pays what is needed. A day's wage. Enough for a family to eat and sleep and live. And still some laborers complain. We worked more. We should get more. It is not fair. This isn't how the system works!

And now the parable begins to reveal its provocative truth. The system has shaped the laborers and the listeners, too. The moment they are hired, the moment we are hired, they separate themselves, we separate ourselves from the ones still waiting. They forget, we forget, that luck and timing play a role. They forget, we forget, that their neighbors, our neighbors still hope for work. They forget, we forget, who stood idle only hours before.

Two weeks ago, the king and the servants were trapped in a system of acquisition and domination. Today, the landowner and the laborers are trapped in a system of scarcity and comparison. Play by the rules or lose. But do not change the rules.

We scoff at generosity, we scoff at grace, because they dare to be bigger, dare to be more imaginative, dare to be bolder, dare to be more impossible than the smallness of predictable systems.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who does not pay attention to timesheets. In other words, God disrupts the system. God refuses to accept the status quo. And if we want to bring about God's world, Millbrook, we must be willing to let our systems be shaken.

Not Fair. Thank Goodness!

Bob Stillerman

Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Matthew 20:1-16

9-27-2026



In God's world, landowners do not just offer resources. They pay attention to how their choices affect others. They ask what role they play in the idleness of their neighbors. And in God's world, laborers do not spend so much time noticing what they lack. They spend more time noticing what their neighbors need. And in God's world, the last are first and the first are last.

Millbrook, the question this parable leaves me with is simple: What good is it to be first if none of us are whole?

I don't have any desire to be chained by resentment, especially resentment over the generosity granted to others, or doled out in terms beyond my control. Life is too short for that.

I believe, I faith, I know that each of us are given value and made whole in the presence of our Maker. Nothing can change that. Whether we labor twelve hours or one. Whether we arrive early or late. Whether we stand idle or employed. God's is not a generosity given on our terms, but it's absolutely a generosity I want to claim.

God's economy is the one I want to live in. Even if Larry in Purchasing leaves early. Even if his TV is bigger. Even if his iPhone is newer and cooler. Even if he paid ten dollars less at the Holiday Inn. See, I'm counting on a grace whose sufficiency needn't be measured, or proven, or balanced to make us whole.

I am tired of keeping up with the Joneses. I want to dwell with God's people. I want to rest in the enough-ness of God's provisions.

May it be so. And may it be soon.

Amen.