

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sunday, September 20, 2020, Year A

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16

***"Never Too Late"***

There is a British rock band, known for their flute and somewhat madrigal sound, named Jethro Tull. Ian Anderson wrote a song that many can resonate with. It is called "Too Old to Rock and Rock and Roll - Too Young to Die." When I hear that song, I often think things like – you cannot teach an old dog new tricks, or even to ask myself am I too old to do this or that. Have you even been there? You know, you get up in the morning and the aches are there; the pains are there and you just cannot do what you used to do? You might also ask yourself – is it worth it? Case in point: some people have asked me as they enter the last days or hours, or sometimes minutes of their life – if it was too late to repair a relationship, or even to accept a relationship with Jesus. I have got to tell you that what immediately comes to mind is this parable from the Lord in which Jesus relates the Kingdom of Heaven to the owner of a vineyard.

Jesus tells of a man who hires a crew to come and work in his vineyard with the promise to pay them a denarius for the day's work – which was the fair going wage for a full day's work. Three hours later, around 9 AM he heads back out and sees some men who were standing around, not doing anything and makes them the offer that if they will come and work for him then he will pay them "*what is right.*" Notice – that was the only promise he made!

The landowner went back out at noon and then again around 3 PM, and made the same offer for workers to come work for him. Then at the 'eleventh hour' which was 5 PM, he found some other men standing around. This last group of workers were hired when only one hour of the workday was left. I have just got to ask - why they had not been seen or hired before? The vineyard-owner asks them point blank why they have not been working: '*Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?*' (Matthew 20:6) Their answer is quite revealing as they tell him "*because no one has hired us.*" They very well might have been the kind of people that may have appeared undesirable, but this landowner went ahead and hired them anyway, and paid them the same as the people who had been slaving away all day in the heat of the sun. Just like in so many of Jesus' parables, the landowner obviously represents God, and the workers were the people.

Our Lord may have intended this parable to be not only a teaching moment, but a warning to His disciples about their own attitudes. When Jesus said, at the end of chapter 19, that "*many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,*" I think He was referring to 'those at the front' of the pack – maybe be the wealthy and powerful, and 'those at the back' meant the disciples themselves.

I think that Jesus was also answering Peter, after Peter asked a pretty self-centered question saying: "*We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?*" (Matthew 19:27) In essence - Peter is asking: 'what's in it for us?' Is not it true that a lot of people ask that question – and we may even have asked that at some point. It is possible that Jesus was

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warning His disciples. God's grace is not something you can bargain with or try to store up and it is not the kind of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. One way of looking at this parable is that what people get from serving God and His kingdom – it is not a paycheck at all, and not a reward for your works. I have said it before and I will say it again – you cannot earn your way to heaven! There is no way to earn your way to heaven!

Please understand – I do not believe that God makes deals with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. God makes covenants, in which He promises us everything and expects everything from us in return. He promises us everything, and you know what – God keeps His promises. He is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to His loving and overflowing generous nature. Remember what I said about what Jonah said and the character of Almighty God? Jonah said: “*gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.*” That is the same character that Jesus is talking about here. He is not rewarding something that we have done. He is not doing anything like that but instead He is showing His absolutely loving and overflowing generous nature. He does this knowing, especially since Jesus took on flesh, that we are frail humans and we usually cannot, and no matter how hard we try - will not, be able to keep our part of the covenant. It happened with the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David – and even with the New Covenant that Jesus made with us. The important thing to remember is that God is faithful – and no matter what it is that we do – He will always faithfully keep His part of the covenant – as He has done from the beginning of time.

Another point we can take from this parable is that God is out among us in the world, He is not sitting up on high, waiting for us to mess up, looking down and waiting to bop us on the head. That is not who God is. He is always faithfully keeping His part of the covenant. He is looking for the people everybody else tries to ignore, welcoming them on the same terms, surprising them (and everybody else) with His generous grace. It is so important for us to remember that God's invitation that Jesus delivers to us beginning with John 3:16 is always there for the 'world' to accept. Not just 2 or 3 of us, one people group, but for the world to accept! "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*" (John 3:16-18) Like accepting the invitation from the landowner to come and be a part of his vineyard – no matter what time you accept – the key, my dear friends, is accepting; it doesn't matter if it is 6 AM or 9 AM or noon, or 3 or 5; the key is that you accept – or in this case – believe. Listen to this phrase: “*whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” The key is to believe. Verse 17 tells us that Jesus came to save the world – not just Israel, but the entire world. It is so important to understand that they must accept His invitation. Listen to verse 18: “*Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*”

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It is so important for us to notice that in all three verses there is nothing that says when you have to believe. It does not matter where you have been, or what you have done – believing in Jesus will change your life – forever and for all eternity! Accepting Jesus as Lord brings forgiveness for all of your sins - because you will want to seek His forgiveness – and He will willingly give it to you. Like the workers in the vineyard - it does not matter when in your life that you say yes – and accept Jesus’ invitation – but what is important is that you accept it.

As a priest and pastor, I have been extremely fortunate to be a witness when people accept Jesus - and sometimes it is in the final days or even moments of their lives. Some of these people have led questionable lives – but found Jesus – or should I say Jesus found them – and their lives and their hearts change completely. I have been with them as they passed into eternity and they knew that they were going to meet their Savior, with an indescribable peace. You need to know this – that no matter how old you are – truly knowing Jesus and believing in Him will bring you eternal life in Him. God keeps His promises!

It does not matter where you have been, or what you have done – believing in Jesus will change your life – forever and for all eternity! You cannot say this enough – to let people know the importance of it. He will change your life. It doesn’t matter if it is in the early part of your life – some people can’t remember when they first accepted Jesus – they have just had Jesus their whole lives, or maybe it is at the eleventh hour – it doesn’t matter - no one is keeping score – except God – and He welcomes you to an eternity with Him. Like the workers in the vineyard - God’s invitation is real. *“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”* (Matthew 20:16) What it all boils down to – is that you say YES!