

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Matthew 20:1-16 (NIV)

September 18, 2005
The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

¹"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³"About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went.

"He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. ⁶About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

⁷" 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.

"He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

⁸"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

⁹"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

¹³"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? ¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Jack O'Hara is the most annoying person with whom my path has ever crossed. Just speaking his name out loud is a feat of mammoth proportions for me. Every memory I have of the guy is a memory I'd like to erase. His cocky walk, his sweat-beaded brow, his self-righteous vocal inflection, his paternal gesturings, and his beady eyes—oh to have these thoughts blow from my mind as the wind blows a dying leaf from a tree in autumn. Who was this man of such an offending nature you ask? The Rev. Dr. Jack O'Hara was my preaching instructor in seminary and I couldn't stand him or his preaching course, if that's what you could call it. The man had a reputation for being a fine preacher and though I think that claim in and of itself is up for debate, his example made it clear that fine preaching is not a precursor to fine teaching. Sure, he had years and years of experience—so many years that he should have been retired by the time I came along to endure his classes, but he had little formal speech training whereas I had majored in speech communication in college. On paper, I had as many academic credentials to be teaching that class as did he. He preached long, windy sermons with great enthusiasm and emotion, but the messages were simplistic. His words reeked of paternalism, sexism, and homophobia and yet his delivery was so entertaining that folks forgave his discrimination and indiscretion. My dislike of the man was so strong and my reaction to him so powerful that I actually cut his picture and biography out of the seminary course catalog. I couldn't bear the reminders of him. He was just that annoying.

Who annoys you? Whose face have you cut out of pictures? Whose voice, when you hear it, makes you want to plug your ears chanting, "I can't hear you. I can't hear you." The very thought of whom, makes your skin crawl and teeth ache. Maybe this person who really disgusts you is a person from your past, someone like Jack O'Hara who leaves you alone except to visit in the occasional memory or dream. Perhaps you have to deal with the person who sends a tidal

wave of disgust washing over you each day, and so you're perpetually drenched in anxiety and dread of the next time you have to deal with him or her. Or maybe you've never even met the target of your contempt, reserving your angst for a celebrity or political figure whose images plastered on the news or in magazines makes you want to turn off the TV or cancel your subscription. These people who we disdain may have hurt us in profound ways, they may just have habits or idiosyncrasies that drive us to distraction, or they may be representatives of ideologies or political positions we abhor. No matter the cause, the point is that they disgust us and we strive to remove ourselves from them and thoughts of them because they make us miserable.

But, for just a moment if we can bear it, instead of fleeing from the offenders, let's call those people's faces to our minds' eyes, inviting them into our imaginations for a short visit. Yep—there he is, Jack O'Hara. Okay, now, imagine that you're standing at a crossroad with your "Jack O'Hara". The road coming towards you suddenly splits into a "Y" and you're at the beginning of one branch of the "Y" and the annoying offender—your "Jack O'Hara"—stands at the beginning of the other branch. Now, turn around and focus your attention on the person walking down the road you have just traveled catching up with you. The person walking rapidly to reach you is Jesus. As he approaches, he looks you in the eye. You ready yourself for his embrace. And, as you meet to be received into that embrace you feel his arm come around your shoulder—but wait—who gives a one armed-hug? Where's the other arm? You guessed it, Jesus' other arm is around the annoying offender. Jesus is standing there hugging you and the annoying offender at the same time.

Now, who wants a more discriminating God? When I think of this image—I do. I don't want Jesus to share his hug for me with anyone else. I'm not thrilled with the thought of spending eternity in heaven with Jesus if it means I have to bunk with Jack O'Hara or see him on my way to breakfast at the heavenly banquet table every morning. I want heaven to reserved for the people I like. I want to be special in heaven—and I'm sure I will be. Only problem is that everyone else there will be special too.

And this, fortunately or unfortunately, is the Good News of today's gospel lesson. The Kingdom of Heaven is not governed by our likes or dislikes, by our sense of right and wrong. The Kingdom of Heaven operates on God's system of justice—a system of justice described in this parable from Matthew.

Jesus tells us that a vineyard owner goes out early in the morning to hire some day laborers. He promises them \$100.00 to harvest the grapes in one of his vineyards in a day. They agree and by 8 AM they're out in the vineyard picking grapes. The misty, lovely sun of the early morning moves from the horizon to its place higher in the sky and beats down on their backs as they work. They are hot and tired by noon—ready for a lunch break. And when they return from lunch they are happy to find that seven more workers have joined them. This will make the work go much faster, those grapes will be harvested in no time. As the sun begins to recede into the high Western sky, 'round about four o'clock in the afternoon, eight more workers come and join them. Though the original workers thought they'd be working until at least 6:30 or 7:00, with these two new groups of folks, they are easily going to finish harvesting by 5:00 and go home early. And that's just what happens. By 5 PM the work is done. The vineyard owner calls all of

the workers back to the main house to be paid. He has a wad of hundred-dollar-bills in his hand. First, he calls on the group that showed up at 4 in the afternoon. He gives them each one of the hundred dollar bills. Then the folks who came at noon got in line, they too each got \$100. And finally, the folks who started work at 8 AM get in line. Seeing that the others all got \$100, they were expecting a little extra, maybe even double because they'd worked twice as long. But instead, they each got \$100. They began to protest—"But, but—we worked all day. Those other folks only showed up for an hour. They shouldn't get paid what we got paid!" The vineyard owner reminds them that early that morning they all agreed to work for the day in exchange for \$100. And he's making good on the deal--\$100 for each of them in exchange for their day's worth of labor. That's it, end of story. No matter how much they grouse and complain, they'll each be going home with a hundred bucks—no more and no less. And that, we're told, is what the Kingdom of Heaven will be like.

So, be thee duly warned. If you've tried to live a good life, if you've worked hard and given generously and gone to church and been nice to people and asked God to forgive you for the times when you've messed up—that's great. The Kingdom of Heaven is yours. But, be prepared because going through those pearly gates just before you could be someone who never worked a day in his life, lived off welfare, and was a lying drunk who kicked dogs and scared children. But, if he repented, if he but once said, "God, I'm sorry", he'll be there too. And not just that, he'll be in front of us, not behind us. So too could the person we just pictured in our minds eye be just before in that heavenly waiting line. So that means I'll be staring at Jack O'Haras baldspot while I'm waiting for my interview with St. Peter.

If we think we're doing okay in this life, we probably don't appreciate this image of sloths and losers lined up before at heaven's gate. But, if we really acknowledge the many ways in which we fall short of the mark, if we admit to ourselves that we're self-righteous or greedy or lazy—if we admit that we're not loving God with our whole heart, soul, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves, then this really is good news. And, it's also very good to hear Jesus' words that the first shall be last and the last shall be first when we're feeling like we're the loser in the last heat in the race of life.

But, in the end, that's not even really the point—this question of who gets there first. The point is that we all get there. Just like all of the vineyard laborers get their \$100, no matter how long their shift lasted, so too we all get our heavenly reward. All we have to do is show up, to say to God that we want the eternal life we've been promised and that we're sorry for the things we've done that have kept this world from being more like heaven. And that's it.

And so you may asking, what's the point of trying to do good, of giving generously, of living well if all it takes is a simple apology as we draw our last breath to make it all okay in the end? Well, if that's what you're wondering, you're gonna have to come back next week because an answer to that question is a sermon in and of itself.

But for now, let's sit comfortably and securely in the knowledge that we are loved, we are accepted, and we have all received the open-ended invitation to eternal life with God. And let's be thankful that God isn't all that discriminating, otherwise we might not be on that heavenly guest list.