

September 24, 2023: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost**~

“The Kingdom of Heaven Cannot be Earned.”

Our services can be found on our website at www.barrechurch.com

Scripture Reading: Matthew 20 v 1-16

1. Introduction:

Much of our material lives are centered around contractual obligations. When we work, we expect to be paid, and we expect to be paid fairly. It works out that way for some, and then there are many who do not get compensated fairly. As an example, we see the strike of the United Auto workers with their demands and expectations against car makers, which is still not resolved. They are still in negotiations, expecting that they be paid fairly. There are other forms of expectations in our lives. In our personal lives we expect to be treated with respect by our loved ones, and friends and in the workplace. We expect truth and honesty in our relationships around various issues. We also expect that people will listen to us when we express ourselves. These kinds of expectations are effective when they are met and when they are reciprocated. It gives us all peace of mind when we earn enough money, when we feel loved and respected and especially when we are at peace with God and with one another. It makes us feel good inside, and it makes us feel well.

2. The Landowner and his workers:

In our passage we read about a landowner and the workers he hired to work in his vineyard. What a generous and hardworking employer he was, to get up early in the morning to find workers, and then to go back a little later in the morning to find some more workers, and again and again till much later. He did not need all these workers, but he could see they were standing around doing nothing and others not being asked to work perhaps. He went out again and again to find workers to help him in his vineyard. He also seems to operate quite differently to most employers. He pays them all the same amount of money, even though they started at different times. The first ones very early in the morning, and the last ones he recruited at the eleventh hour, which was the 5 p.m. hour of the day. What a discrepancy of hiring and payment. It is therefore normal for the first ones to complain about being paid the same as the ones who started late. They worked the whole day and in the heat of the sun, and

these last ones worked only one hour. From a human perspective and expectation, this sounds so unfair to these workers who started early.

On the other hand, we see a landowner who is generous, who must have realized these were family men who needed work to help their families. He acted out of compassion towards these individuals. It still sounds a little unfair to the early starters, and so when they complained to him, he reminded them of his contract with them, that he agreed to pay them one denarius. He did not change his contract with them, just because he hired others later in the day. He therefore had the right to do with his own money as he pleased, he said.

3. Conclusion: The Kingdom of Heaven Cannot be Earned:

This story sounds so counterintuitive to best business practices. We don't know whether the early starters returned the next day, or whether they were hired for only one day. What we do know is that Jesus is telling this as a parable to make a point, to teach His disciples a lesson about the Kingdom of Heaven. He says in verse 1 that the Kingdom of Heaven is like this landowner. It is counterintuitive and countercultural to what they're used to. The first will be the last and vice versa. It is about the reversal of human expectations, says R.T. France in his commentary on Matthew. France continues by saying that in the Kingdom of Heaven God rules by grace, not by human ideals of deserving. The landowner therefore represents God, and God rules differently than the way we rule on earth. God operates from a place of Spirit and eternal blessings. God does not treat one person differently than the other. God gives to all the same love, grace, and mercy.

No one person can claim more of the goodness and generosity of God. No one can therefore receive a higher reward in the Kingdom of Heaven. And so, the Kingdom of Heaven cannot be earned. It is a gift from God to us all, and as we stand ready, God passes by, and reaches out to call our names to receive all the blessings from God. This is a lesson for the disciples as they tried to make sense of the way of Christ. His way is so far beyond the material way of life. He calls us to have higher expectations of ourselves and of our world, of our church, our families. He asks us to be different, to live our lives like this landowner, giving of ourselves, filled with compassion. He asks that we look around and see where we can create a different kind of fairness, that of dignity and respect that looks and feels like the Kingdom of God. May God help us all to answer that call. Amen