

## The Vineyard Owner, God, Comparisons and Justice Matthew 20:1-16 by Reverend Katie Van Der Linden

Adam and Eve needed no justice. They were alone, they had each other, they had God. As more people grew and society was born, the concept of justice became necessary. Justice is the fair treatment of one another. It is not equality; no one is truly equal. It is making sure that everyone gets what he or she needs.

In the 1700s, as the United States was forming, the Moravian settlement was evolving. It was a unique community, choosing to minister with the Native Americans and being pacifists in the face of revolution and divisions. These first settlers created a just community, choosing to live together rather than work separately. They established schools for men and women, worked for the good of the community, and made sure all had food, shelter and care. Although holding various jobs from tanner to blacksmith, funds were shared and no one went without. The roots of the Moravian Church remind us that everything belongs to God; our responsibility is to share the abundance of God. This is justice.

The Parable of the Vineyard owner (Matthew 20:1-16) begins with an owner needing help. He is not offering a handout; he is looking for men to work. So he invites those laborers who are waiting to be hired to work and be paid. They are paid well, a whole day's wage. This is fair, a day's wage for a day's work. But then the vineyard owner returns for more workers, twice more. When he is handing out pay, those who were hired last, simply working one hour, are given a full day's wage. This seems very generous, so naturally the full-day laborers expect even more generosity. They are astounded when they, too, receive one day's wage. Instead of rejoicing in being paid a fair wage, they complain about the other laborers who are paid the same.

Is this unjust? Is the vineyard owner being unfair by paying those who worked the whole day the same as those who worked only one hour?

If this story were described today's society, the answer would appear to be easy. Those who work more hours should get paid more. But is that justice? In our culture, we tend to look at what one deserves instead of what one needs. God is just. God gives what is needed. God does not give what is deserved.

Every one of those workers needed a livable wage. Everyone needs food, shelter, care, the ability to earn a living wage. And the vineyard owner gave just that, a livable wage. Was it fair? Do some deserve more based upon their work?

Our society is set up on a rewards-based system, instead of a just-based system. We rank people by education, background, abilities, and the list goes on. God does not rank

anyone. Instead God says we all need to live, earn, and take care of one another. That vineyard owner completely cared for those workers. He was generous. He found people in need and gave them an opportunity to earn a living, and then paid them. He was fair and just, even if the workers objected. Had none of them known what the others were paid, they all would have walked away satisfied. Instead, greed and comparisons caused a wonderful gesture of generosity to be questioned and quarreled.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) How is generosity downgraded by comparisons?
- 2) How can we seek out what is needed instead of deserved?
- 3) How can we work toward Godly justice in a world of earn and pay?
- 4) How would you react if you were the worker who worked a full day? The worker who worked one hour? The vineyard owner?