**Parable of the Vineyard Workers**

**Jesus gave us parables to demonstrate the abiding love of God. There is the story of the Prodigal Son giving us an example of no matter when we return to God to seek his forgiveness, he will welcome us with open arms. There is also the story of Peter saying to Jesus, “… how often shall I forgive? As many as seven times? Jesus answered him, “Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven.” Jesus is telling us God will forgive us over and over again, no matter how often we need and truly seek forgiveness.**

**We add another parable to the two I’ve already mentioned. It’s the story of workers in a vineyard. Some work all day, others only work a few short hours. At the end of this parable, the landowner pays the workers he sends into the vineyard later in the day the same amount as the workers who have been toiling in the vineyard all day long. He also pays the late comers first. There is grumbling and complaining from the all-day workers believing they deserve more money than the workers who came late. It’s a natural instinct to want more compensation for working all day than the workers who come late to do the work. We might grumble just like the brother did in the story of the Prodigal Son returning home to their father. His brother had stayed and was faithful to his father, and yet the father welcomed his wayward son home with open arms and gifts. We’re also told we have to forgive people seven times seventy. Why should we forgive that many times? Why is a wayward son welcomed home so generously by his father? Why do the late comers working in the vineyard get the same amount of compensation as those who have been working all day long/ Why is any of this right? Don’t we all deserve every bit of compensation for any and all good deeds we do for another person? What is all this forgive business about?**

**In the final statement from Jesus in this parable he said, “So the last will be first certainly doesn’t make sense in our world to allow the last to go first. Most of us couldn’t come up with a good reason to justify the last going first. Yet God wants all of us to understand his gracious and abiding love for each of us. Even those who turn away from God and finally find him again and know what the old hymn *Amazing Grace* is saying. “...was lost but now I’m found.” His grace is everlasting and available to each of us no matter when we turn to him.**

**Okay, some of you might be thinking all of that is fine, but why do the last come first? Especially in our time when our country is so divided, we can’t even decide if we all should wear masks. John and I drove through Iowa last week, Covid is running extremely high there. Yet so many people we saw in that state were not wearing masks. God must look down on us and wonder what keeps us so far apart on such simple things as wearing a mask to protect ourselves and others. I have a friend who said she apologizes every night to God for our foolishness, when so many of us in our country don’t even have enough to eat. In this time and place it might seem particularly irksome to some of us why the last should be first.**

**When the landowner of the vineyard found men standing around, he asked them, “Why are you standing around idle all day?” The men answered, “…because no one has hired us.” Then the landowner sent them into the vineyard. Unlike the landlord or God our world is not so welcoming to those who seek work and can’t find any. When we lived in Austin, there were always men on the streets looking for work. Many of them couldn’t find any work, even if they waited all day. God shows us in this parable he will always welcome those who were lost and now are found. God isn’t concerned when we turn to him in our lives. Once we seek God out or return to him, he will always welcome us with open arms.**

**Yes, God always welcomes us with open arms, but why should any late comers get to go first? Or as Jesus said, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” I can only think about this statement from my own experiences. I feel blessed because I’ve known the presence of God and Jesus in my life for a very long time. The constant connection with God, and Jesus and the Holy Spirit gives me a center point, a presence to always turn to and know I’m loved. I’m more content and more able to experience happiness toward the people I love and the beauty that exists in our world, because I’m found and see more clearly than I would if I wasn’t connected to God.**

**I think the later in our life we find God, the less time we have to experience his abiding love during our time on this earth. Yet the sooner we feel the presence of God in our lives, the longer we have to experience what it means to not be lost but found and loved by God. Those who come lost haven’t experienced the love of God as some of us have been privileged to know his presence deep down in our hearts. I believe that’s why they need to be first in God’s vineyard, or in his heaven. They need to catch up with those of us who have rested in his love for longer than they did while they lived here on earth. Some may need to catch up with what it means to be grateful for what surrounds them, rather than wonder, “Why don’t I have more.” They may need to learn the pleasure in giving to others in gifts of time and care. They many need to lean on God in times of great upheaval or loss.**

**We who know God for a long time in our lives have the advantage of knowing when we’re hurt or lonely, God is always there to comfort us and give us his love. We who know his love can easily afford to let the last go first into the vineyard of heaven. We can let the Prodigal Son be welcomed by his father and not be jealous. We can forgive others over and over again because God forgives us over and over again. We can also let those who’ve just found God go ahead of us into the everlasting love of God, because we’ve known his love longer than they have. No matter when we come to God, we are blest because God loves each and every one of us . Amen**