092020 “Hard Work Will …”

Matthew 20:1-16 “Kingdom Come” Series

I believe strongly in the power and the value of hard work. I was raised by parents who were extremely hard workers. They both grew up in the Great Depression. They worked hard for everything they had. And they taught my brothers and me how to work hard.

I’m not going to pretend that, as a kid, I always enjoyed doing dishes, dusting furniture, taking out garbage, feeding the dog, pulling weeds, cutting grass, washing windows, trimming bushes, cleaning the garage, painting the shed, picking vegetables, and tackling all the other projects my parents assigned to me and my brothers. But I did learn to work hard from my parents, like many of you did, too. And to this day I believe in hard work, and I appreciate those around me, those in the congregation, and those in the community, who work hard at what they do.

There are many popular sayings you may have heard. “Hard work will always pay off.” “Hard work will never betray you.” “Hard work will be rewarded.” “Hard work will not go in vain.” “Hard work will always beat talent.” “Hard work will get you anywhere.”

I don’t really know who came up with all those sayings. But they’re engrained in me. And I have a tendency to believe them all.

So now do me a favor. Take your right hand, hold it up, reach around your shoulder, and give yourself a nice little pat on the back. All your hard work is appreciated! You’re doing a great job!

But now let’s talk about today’s parable. Now let’s talk about the kingdom of heaven. Now let’s talk about what Jesus has to say about all our hard work, and about what really gets us into God’s kingdom.

Yes, hard work is important, valuable, and necessary in many parts of our day-to-day living in this world. I’ll believe that until the day I die. But the Bible teaches us all today that it’s not our hard work, but only God’s grace, that counts, in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus teaches you and me today that it’s only God’s grace that matters, when it comes to you and me standing before God or being turned away.

Now, in today’s parable, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a landowner who goes out and personally recruits workers for his vineyard. Some work the whole day, some work part of the day, some work only one hour. But, at the end of the day, the landowner pays them all the same wage.

The full-day workers grumble. “We’ve worked harder and longer than all the rest! Shouldn’t we be compensated accordingly?” And the landowner tells them, “I’m paying you what we agreed I’d pay you. And if I choose to be generous to others, don’t begrudge my grace.”

Jesus is making a powerful point with his story. God is the landowner, and throughout the Bible this term “vineyard” is often used to describe his people, his followers, those who are his prized possession. This parable describes God inviting people in, seeking out and calling people in, at this hour of the day and at that hour of the day, to be part of his team.

When did God call you into his vineyard crew? Were you raised in the faith, taught to believe and trust in Jesus as a little child? Did you wander away from the vineyard, and return at some point when God reached out to you again? Did you become a Christian believer much later in your life?

The point is this. Whoever you are, your place in vineyard, your spot in the kingdom of heaven, is entirely dependent on the grace of God. He invited you. He reached out to you. He sent his Son to die for you. He calls you to repentance. He gives you his Holy Spirit. He enables you to believe in Jesus. He forgives your sins. He promises you heaven. He saves your soul.

And all of this -- and here’s the part that’s super-challenging to hear, for people like me who believe in hard work and are used to being rewarded for hard work – all of this God does for me, and for you, not because of our hard work. It’s entirely dependent on the grace of God. We don’t deserve any of it. We can’t earn a bit of it. We’re not welcome in the kingdom because we’re hard workers, or because we’re pretty good people, or because we have this much faith or that much self-righteousness. Our place in God’s kingdom is entirely dependent on the grace of God.

And, friends, that is such a relief! That is exactly the good news we need to hear from God, and what all of our friends and neighbors need to hear! Because none of us can ever work hard enough to get right with God. None of us can free ourselves from sin’s effects, no matter how hard we try. None of us can vaccinate ourselves from the sin virus that is a truly global, universal pandemic. No sin-damaged human being can stand before our holy, perfect God. But the Gospel proclaims that God has done the work for us. Jesus Christ did all the horrible, harsh, deadly work on our behalf, giving up his life for you and me.

And no work remains for us, but to believe. And even faith is more than we can do on our own, so God helps us trust. He aids our belief by his Spirit, and calls us again today into his kingdom, his vineyard.

All this he does for us, purely out of grace. Grace alone. That’s the message of the Bible, and the good news message of today’s kingdom parable.

I still believe that hard work is a really good thing, in so many, many ways. But in the one way that matters most, being right with God, it’s entirely dependent on God’s grace. That is such a relief, and such incredibly good news, for all of us! Amen.