

Laborers in the Vineyard
Matthew 20:1-16
March 26, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Sometime in May, I will go out into my garden and start pulling weeds, and I will keep at it for most of the summer. We have these gorgeous Asian irises that seem determined to jump the boundary of their little garden plot, and they are wickedly difficult to pull up when they appear in the pea gravel around our fire pit or in the perennial bed next to where they belong. We have ordinary weeds, too – dandelions, little marguerites, clover, grasses that tangle in among the creeping phlox. I keep at them as long as I can stand it in the summer, but eventually I just let them have their way because they have more energy than I do. I don't enjoy pulling weeds. My back doesn't like it at all. I have to really talk myself into getting started, and I have to take it in small doses. It is a task that just feels like work.

But also, sometime in May or early June, I will stick my hands down into the dirt to plant parsley and mint and oregano and basil in my herb barrels. I will buy some little pots of petunias and set them out along the edge of my perennial garden. I will water my day lilies and hydrangeas and daisies and lilacs. My back aches just as much from these tasks as it does from weeding. But I love the planting and tending, the blooming, and the aroma of the herbs so much that it doesn't really feel like work at all to help these plants grow. It feels like joy.

Every evening in the summer, when weather permits, Dave and I sit on our deck and look out over our yard. We talk about what we have accomplished that day and what is still to be done. It brings us deep satisfaction.

Except for the weeding, of course. That still just feels like work.

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In today's scripture, Jesus tells of a landowner who is hiring laborers for a vineyard, and I just wonder if what they were doing all day long was pulling weeds, because at least the first ones who were hired seem pretty grumpy about it.

"Come to my vineyard and work," says the landowner in the early morning. "I will give you a day's wages." And they come.

"Come to my vineyard and work," says the landowner at noon. "I will give you a day's wages." And more workers come.

"Why are you standing around? Come to my vineyard and work," says the landowner in the late afternoon. "I will still give you a day's wages."

Whether this arrangement feels fair or not depends on the nature of the work. If they are just pulling weeds all day long, bent over, staring at the ground, with the sun blazing on their backs, then receiving the same pay as someone who comes much later doesn't seem fair at all.

But what if they love what they are doing? What if they come to the vineyard in the morning and feel the fresh sunshine on their faces, glad for the morning light? What if their eyes are filled with the vibrant

colors of the plants, and they hear bird song all morning long? What if their hands feel God's abundance as they pluck a bunch of grapes? What if they are so filled with gladness from the work in the vineyard that a fair day's pay seems like just the icing on the cake?

Sometimes work is just work. Sometimes it is a joy.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is like this landowner, who calls to everyone, all day long. There is no test here, no catechism, no question of individual worth. Just come. All are welcome. If you need a place to be useful in this world, no matter your age, come. If you need some money to put food on your table, come. If you want to feel the morning light on your face and listen to bird song all day long, as you do the Lord's work, come. Come.

I think when we hear this story most of us think of ourselves as the ones who were hired early in the morning, laboring away, getting no more for our work than those who were called to work late. That is always MY first take on this story, my instinctive reaction. But then I remember that God's call to us is everchanging, always renewing itself in our lives, and we are all late to respond at one point or another. Yet God still says, "Come." What a generous, loving God we worship!

American theologian Frederick Buechner said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. Isn't that beautiful? I love this image because it reminds me that doing God's work is not one-sided. It is not just about work. It is about our own joy. Responding to God's claim on our lives fills us, heart and soul.

We do God's work in this church. If I didn't believe that I wouldn't be here. And, as in any church, there are always some weeds that need to be pulled. But if being a part of God's church, worshiping here, being in fellowship with all these wonderful people, reaching out into our community to help others, is life-giving for you, then doing the work of the church can feel like joy, like growing flowers, like harvesting fresh herbs, and not nearly so much like pulling weeds.

We are a small church that accomplishes amazing things. We are significant in this community. We feed hungry people. We provide space for community organizations to thrive. We teach children about God. We teach adults, too. We study the scriptures. We make a joyful noise every single Sunday. We worship the living God. And, because we are a small church, everyone gets to wear more than one hat, which means we all have a lot of opportunities to find our calling. Where does your deep gladness meet the world's deep hunger? Where is God calling you?

Amen