

September 24, Ordinary 25A (Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16)

The work of advancing the kingdom doesn't translate into fair compensation as we understand it.

by [Chris Dorsey](#) in the [August 30, 2017](#) issue

In this week's text from Philippians, Paul looks forward to resting in the presence of Christ—while also rejoicing in the ability to continue the work he is called to do. He suggests that his rejoicing would be even greater if he were to stay, since he would take joy not just in his own salvation and growth but in the subsequent salvation and growth of those who come after him. As he considers the work he and others are engaged in to further the kingdom, his attitude seems to be this: the more the merrier.

Work figures prominently in the passage from Matthew as well. When Peter asks what Jesus' followers will receive for having given up everything they own to follow him, Jesus assures him that they will receive more than they have given up—and eternal life besides. But then he adds a strange postscript to this assurance: "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (19:30). And then he tells the story of the laborers in the vineyard.

A landowner goes out looking for workers for his vineyard. At the beginning of the day he offers a full day's wages to the first workers he hires. As the day progresses, he hires more workers—but he pays each group the same day's wages for decreasing amounts of work. This upsets those who started earlier and worked longer. The landowner rebukes them for their complaints and declares that it is his prerogative to do as he pleases with his money.

Time is money in our industrialized society, and the complaints of those who began work early in the day no doubt resonate with us. Workers who are paid an hourly wage get compensated for the number of hours they work. We get easily annoyed when we think our coworkers are less productive than we are, so imagine how we

might feel if we found that our coworkers were making the same money we were making for working fewer hours than we work.

In fact, we might even understand Peter's original question about how much Jesus' followers might gain, since they were the first to give up everything and commit themselves to following Christ. In our world, technology startups can turn their initial investors or earliest employees into millionaires. It seems only right that those who got in on the ground floor should reap the greatest rewards.

But Jesus challenges our conventional ideas about labor, income, productivity, and wealth. The kingdom, God's beloved community, is not an industrialized society where hours and minutes can be converted into dollars and cents. The work of advancing the kingdom doesn't translate into fair compensation as we understand it.

Instead, our focus must first be on the generosity of the one who calls us to participate in that work. The landowner is eager to make the vineyard as productive as possible. He seems to be focused not just on profit and loss but on getting as many people as possible to help with the harvesting. We hear echoes of "the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." The landowner is willing to offer more than a fair wage, because there is more at stake than a simple wage/labor calculation.

And the landowner does not fault the later workers for not being there sooner. It seems they have been looking for work all day but have been unable to find it. Perhaps the landowner recognizes that the workers' basic life needs are the same, regardless of what time they started work. They need the same amount of food and the same sort of shelter; they have the same need to provide for their families. In paying the later workers the same amount—the rate for a day's labor—the landowner affirms their basic needs. We see here God's affirmation of the dignity and worth of all whom God loves and invites to be part of the kingdom.

The landowner wants as many people as possible to join in the harvest.

Rather than grumble about the lack of fairness in the situation, the earlier workers could have seen the overall outcome as positive and in line with the goal of a productive vineyard. There is an opportunity for the earlier workers to rejoice in knowing they have been paid a day's wage but also that the generosity of the landowner is making it possible for others to feed their families.

We are called to participate in God's mission of spreading the gospel, expanding the beloved community, and transforming the world toward greater justice and mercy. And we need all the help we can get. The more help we get, the more we are to rejoice and celebrate the ways God will bless those who join in our collective work.

Paul understands this. He would gladly rejoice in receiving his reward of being present with Christ, but he would rejoice even more in being able to continue his work in the vineyard—and he would celebrate those God adds to the roster of laborers. We as Christians are called to celebrate and join in the generosity of God. The expansion of the beloved community and the resulting advancement of God's reign of justice and mercy—this is itself the greatest reward.