It is tempting sometimes to think of Jesus' parables as tender lullabies, simple entertaining stories, platitudes along the same lines as the motivational posters seen in gyms or mottos in high school yearbooks: “Keep your eyes on the skies and your feet on the ground.” “Tough times never last. Tough people do.” Or my favorite: “When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.” (My senior year yearbook quote, a platitude sublime, written before I had a clue about the darkness this world can hold.) But Clarence Jordan, the author of the *Cotton Patch* version of much of the New Testament, had a different, more dangerous view of parables. Jordan wrote that “when Jesus delivered his parables, he lit a stick of dynamite, covered it with a story about everyday life, and then left it with his audience.” The first few times I preached on this parable, I was oblivious to its explosive power and treated it like a sweet tale with a nice moral: “Don't be jealous of what God gives others, especially when you have so much yourself.” There's no question that message is in there, but this parable has so much more, the kind of stuff that makes us kind of itchy and sweaty, uncomfortable in our own skin.

So what did Jesus blow up when he told this parable to his first-century disciples? Jesus blew up cultural ideas about justice. When the workers who had been chosen early in the day saw what the latecomers were getting – a full day's pay - they must have started chattering with excitement. “If the guys who worked just an hour or so got a day's pay, just think about how much more we're going to get! Let's see if we can come back here tomorrow!” No wonder the men started harrassing the manager when they got the same pay as those who showed up late. “These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, we who slaved all day under a scorching sun.” It wasn't fair. Equal pay for unequal work? What kind of economy was this? This just wasn't good business, paying workers for work they didn't do. Why would the grumbling and tired grapepickers even consider coming back to such a wacky workplace? Sweating in a vineyard all day for enough money for that day's food for one's family was hard enough without this insult to their sense of right and wrong.

We get that, we twenty-first century disciples. We're a “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” kind of people. It's what our country is built on. Work hard, go to school, learn a trade, get a good job and keep it. It's the same economy as first-century Palestine, only better. We work for more than just a day's worth of food. We work so we can have nice homes, good health insurance, retirement plans. We work so we can be financially secure, so our families don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from. It's only fair, we say. If others aren't as smart as we are, if they can't figure out the system like we can, they won't have what we have. That kind of inequality is even beneficial for an economy like ours. Cheap labor keeps prices down and profits up and that's what our country is about. Let them have a place to live, one they can afford and enough basic food to eat. But sick pay, health care, educational opportunities, a pathway to the American dream? Well, those things just aren't for everyone.

It's a commonly held belief that we should be rewarded according to what we have earned or deserved. Our marketplace upholds that belief. There are even some Christians who would tell you that God gives those who live the good Christian life financial rewards and security. This God dispenses justice like a Coke machine gives a cold drink on a sweltering day: put in your good deeds and hard work and you will be rewarded accordingly. But Jesus' parable suggests something else, doesn't it? What if God's economy is different from ours? What if God, the owner of the vineyard, is not simply a dispenser of our kind of fairness, but a provider of justice for all those who need it? What if that offends our sense of right and wrong when we're called to be part of this up-side down plan of God's? Let's look back at the parable. We tend to share the outrage of the all-day workers when we find them getting the same pay as those who worked far fewer hours. But notice what Jesus doesn't say in this story. He doesn't say the workers hired at noon and three o'clock and five were lazy or lay around gossiping all day. Jesus says the ones left in the town square weren't working because no one had hired them. We have no indication that they were slower or less productive workers than those lucky enough to be hired in the morning. Day laboring is is a tough way to make a living, both then and now. Sometimes there is enough work to go around. Sometimes there simply is not.

So what if, in our time, instead of jumping to our own kind of judgment, we try looking at certain people differently, more compassionately, with the heart of the vineyard owner? What if we consider that people who don't work (most of them anyway), don't work because they don't have jobs? What if poor people are poor because they don't have very much money? What if homeless people are homeless because they don't have homes? What if people with pre-existing conditions have them because they got sick?

What if DREAMERS are in this country because their parents brought them here when they were too young to have a choice? What if Jesus is playing with dynamite here and we are all about to get blown up?

For God's generosity blows the doors off our models of right and wrong, our sense of entitlement, our great good luck to be born where and to whom we were. God is not simply a dispenser of good fortune – put your money in, get your prize – God is the explosive that blows up the world. God's outrageous economics led God to give up what was most precious to God so that all may know forgiving, inclusive, life-altering love. And here is the truth: you can't read the Bible and not know that Jesus has a special place in his heart for the poor, the ignored, those who face daily discrimination, degradation, disrespect, those who are treated by those around him just as he was. And Jesus has a special place in the world for you and me, we who owe all we have to him. Jesus blows up our desire to be Sunday morning Christians who don't want to make waves in the world Monday through Saturday. If he didn't think we would blow ourselves up in the process, maybe Jesus would hand us sticks of dynamite when we leave this place each week and send us to find places where his truth can blow up all the lies we are told and tell one another simply because it is easier to live that way.

Wild, untamed, crazy love – that's what the owner of the vineyard is all about. Do we deserve it? Of course not. Does anyone deserve it? No. In the words of Martin Luther, “In the presence of God's mercy, we are all beggars.” God's love is not about what we deserve; it's about what God yearns to give us, despite our self-righteous ranking of those around us. God's love takes delight in us – every single one of us. God's love will go where it will go until the power structures and economies, the dishonest politics and unfair labor practices of an unjust world are blown to pieces and love is all that is left.

Amen.

*Pentecost 16A*

*September 24, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 20:1-16*