

September 18, 2005  
First Parish Church  
Matthew 20:1-16  
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## *What is Right?*

This last Thursday evening I went to the Cumberland Center UCC church to assist their search committee in a mock interview. I arrived early and had a chance to talk with one of the committee members who had also arrived early. He commented on how stressed he was feeling with all the things going on in his life: work, attending his teenage children's soccer games, the search committee, and a couple of other community organizations. I asked him when he had any "Sabbath" time. He confessed that when he took time "off" to just rest, he finds he feels guilty.

September is a time when the balance between work and rest gets tested. On the one hand, September is an exciting time - college students are back at Bowdoin, the choir is enriching our worship again, church school has begun, small groups here at church have started meeting again. And there are all the other extra-curricular activities in which your family participates. On the other hand, there is such a myriad of possibilities, we may find ourselves feeling like a kid in a candy store. It's hard to resist trying just one more thing. It all tastes great. However, before long we often discover that we just don't feel so good.

When I was growing up in Waldoboro, I didn't go to preschool. I didn't go to kindergarten. Our school didn't have

it at the time. So, I was almost seven when I went to an organized class for the first time. I was used to playing at home with my brothers, and now I was in school all day. My mother remembers that, one morning during my second week of school that first year, I stood at the door and with a big sigh said, "I wish I didn't feel so good." I had figured out that if I was physically sick I wouldn't have to go to school. However, clearly I was feeling tired out and maybe overwhelmed by this big change in my life.

Maybe some of you are already feeling that way - only three weeks into this new fall season. One of the perceptions people often have of retired people is that they have all kinds of time. However, in talking with some of you, I've heard you say that you don't know how you ever had time to work with all you are doing now. I've also heard a number of you say that you are very concerned about the pace of life your children and grandchildren are living. Just in the last couple of week, several parents of young children have said to me:

- We do too much.
- It feels crazy already.
- Here we go again!

Is this right? Is this the way we want to live? Is this what God calls us to?

We live with the subtle and sometimes not so subtle pressure that the more we do the “richer” our life will be. One of the dangerous implications of this belief is the feeling that the more we do the more God will bless us – the more we do the more God will love us.

So far I’ve only mentioned the personal things to which we attend. Yet, as people of faith we know we are called to be concerned beyond just our own neighborhood. Pick up the newspaper- (Thursday’s *Times Record*)- and the headlines remind us what an intense month this has been on the local, national, and international scenes.

Locally, it is beginning to sink in that the naval air station will be closing. We wonder what kinds of challenges and opportunities this will present for our community.

Nationally, we have been confronting the horrors in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We have seen in graphic ways the realities of poverty in one of our poorest cities.

Internationally, we are aware of the increased violence in Iraq. We recognize that we are an increasingly divided country with regards to our military presence there. During this past year, in getting to know you all, I have come to realize that in our own congregation we hold a wide range of convictions about this matter.

All of these matters deserve our prayerful consideration, honest dialogue (I think we need more of that) and faithful response. We know we are called to respond with compassion to all these situations but sometimes we also

know the experience of compassion fatigue.

So are you tired yet? It’s only the middle of September.

What is right?

Does God want us to be busy 24/7? Do we get more rewards/blessings for being at it from sunup to sundown?

I think the people in today’s parable who had been at it from sunup to sundown would have said yes. Those who had been there all day had agreed to work for a day’s wages. This was the standard day’s wage, but it was basically subsistence living. It would provide “the daily bread.” The other laborers that had been hired at mid-morning, at noon, at mid-afternoon and then just an hour before quitting were promised “what is right.” So what is right?

This parable starts out with an ordinary workday context. It appears on the surface that it may be an economics lesson. However, as it develops we begin to realize that something else is going on. Jesus’ parables always have a twist, something unexpected, something that turns a common perception upside down. That’s what makes them a parable in contrast to a “moral” lesson. Parables often leave us sufficiently puzzled- even uncomfortable- so we have to keep engaging them at deeper levels. They are not about the ordinary ways of the world. They are about the ways of God.

Of course, the landowner was gracious when he gave those who had only labored for an hour a whole daily wage. You can imagine those who had been there all day were now anticipating that

they would get more. Surely, there will be some equity in the pay scale. But this is not a quid pro quo situation. This is not an economics lesson.

Imagine if you had two children – one who had worked all day and one who had only worked an hour – and you paid them the same. You can hear it now, “That’s NOT fair!” But this parable is not about economic fairness.

This parable is about the mystery of grace. It is about our value having less to do with “doing” and more to do with “being.” It is about a spiritual reality that is often hard to grasp in an overscheduled, hard working, overachieving society. God offers “daily bread” – the bread of heaven to all who show up.

In the Exodus passage the Israelites are given their daily bread with the manna from heaven. They are told they may only collect enough for one day. If you try to hold it over, it rots. They try. It rots. However, on the sixth day they are told to collect enough for two days. Miraculously it does not rot. They are given a day of Sabbath – a day to rest.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh in *Gift from the Sea* talks about the importance of rest. Remember she has left her husband and five children behind in Connecticut to spend two weeks alone at the beach. Near the end of the book she writes, *My life in Connecticut, I begin to realize, lacks (the) quality of significance (I find here) and therefore of beauty, because there is so little empty space. The space is scribbled on; the time has been filled. There are so few empty pages in my engagement pad, or empty hours in the day, or empty rooms in my life in which*

*to stand alone and find myself. Too many activities, and people and things. Too many worthy activities, valuable things, and interesting people. For it is not merely the trivial which clutters our lives but the important as well.* (Pg. 115)

What is right? To have time to rest. To keep Sabbath. It’s a commandment that is easy to overlook and hard to keep.

The Bible starts with a story of creation. It tells about what is created on day 1, day 2 and so on. But the real ending of the story is that on the seventh day God rests. May it be so with us.