

# It's Five O'Clock Somewhere... For Someone

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa  
Text: Matthew 20:1-16 pg. 801

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## SCRIPTURE

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Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

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## SERMON

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I will readily confess that I am not much of a country music fan. I couldn't tell you much of anything about Carrie Underwood or Reba McEntire or Blake Shelton or George Strait. If that is what you like, that's great; good for you. I am much more into classic rock, or jazz, or even traditional Celtic folk music. I will take Celtic Thunder over Garth Brooks any day. But while I may not care for pedal steel guitars, I do have to admit that some of the lyrics to country songs are really good at describing what life is all about. Of course many of you realize I got my sermon title from a 2003 top country hit, a duet performed by Alan Jackson and Jimmy Buffet called *It's Five O'Clock Somewhere*. The first verse goes like this:

The sun is hot and that old clock is movin' slow an' so am I  
Work day passes like molasses in wintertime but it's July  
I'm gettin' paid by the hour, an' older by the minute  
My boss just pushed me over the limit  
I'd like to call him somethin' I think I'll just call it a day  
Pour me somethin' tall an' strong  
Make it a "Hurricane" before I go insane  
It's only half-past twelve but I don't care  
It's five o'clock somewhere

Now, perhaps this is pushing things a little because it does refer to the consumption of an adult beverage which may not be appropriate sermon material, but the song does reflect the sentiments of many when it comes to their jobs. According to a survey taken last year in 2016, only about half of working Americans are satisfied with

their jobs. And that is a higher rate than it has been for over ten years. This means that the other half find themselves getting paid by the hour and older by the minute, and would very much like to call their boss something, or at the very least call it a day. And anyway, it's five o'clock somewhere.

So what is the thing people find most frustrating when it comes to their job? Interestingly, it is not their paycheck, although that is certainly a factor. No, actually respect is cited as the top reason employees are frustrated with their jobs. If you do not feel like you are listened to, or that your boss knows you or values your efforts, or if you feel you are just an interchangeable part in the corporate machine, that affects you more than whether or not you are getting paid top dollar.

Of course part of being respected is being treated fairly, and our scripture for this morning is all about some employees who feel like they are being literally shortchanged at the end of a hard day's work. The story begins with a wealthy landowner who goes into town and hires some laborers to come and work in his vineyard. It says that they agreed on the usual daily wage. Once again we find here an interesting word that we talked about two weeks ago. When it says they "agreed" on the wage, the word in the original language is *symphoneo*, or symphony. Everyone was in harmony, sounding well together, that the amount he was offering was fair and decent. They all agreed on this.

Now, apparently this was harvest time, and we here in Iowa know that farmers work as long and as hard as they can when the harvest rolls around. So throughout the day this landowner goes back into town and hires more workers. An hour before sunset he brings in the last group and they work until it is too dark to work anymore. At quitting time, everyone collects their pay and suddenly the harmony is disrupted. What was agreed to at the beginning of the day now seems grossly unfair. Everyone is paid the same amount. It doesn't matter if you worked 12 hours or one hour, everyone gets the same. Needless to say the ones who worked all day were not very happy. As the song said, the boss had pushed them over the limit and they wanted to tell him something. Our text says they grumbled, and the Greek word is one that sounds like what it means. The word is *gonguzo*. Doesn't that sound like grumbling or muttering? Well, gonguzo, gonguzo, gonguzo!

Let's face it; we don't blame them for doing some gonguzo-ing. We are inclined to agree with them. There is no way of getting around that the landowner was not being fair. Those workers had a legitimate grievance. They had put in a lot more effort than the others, yet they had nothing more to show for it. Furthermore, it seems like the landowner was rather indiscrete. There is no question that it is his prerogative to pay the workers whatever he wants. So he should have paid off the early ones and sent them on their way. Once they were gone, and out of earshot he could pay the later ones whatever he saw fit. But he pays the last ones first, so naturally the early ones expect more when they step up to the paymaster. If Rockwell or Cargill or Aegon treated people this way, you can be sure complaints would be registered at the HR office, and there would be a lot of people very upset.

But we are seeing this story from a middle-class American perspective. In our society we believe very strongly that you don't just get stuff handed to you. You have to earn it. We have an "earned based" economy. You should be rewarded for your hard work, and the harder the work the greater the reward. But one of the things that Jesus is trying to teach us in this parable is that the Kingdom of God, or the Beloved Community as we like to call it, is not an earn-based economy. Instead it is a "need based" economy. In God's Beloved Community everyone gets what they need, whether or not they have earned it.

While the wages the landowner offered were fair, they were not lavish. In fact, these wages were just about enough for these laborers to buy one day's amount of food for their families. This is at the heart of the line in the Lord's Prayer, "give us this day, our daily bread." The prayer is asking for God to help us cover the very basics, day to day. So if laborers did not earn this basic amount, the chances were good that there would not be enough food and their children would go hungry. Now at 5:00 in the afternoon, when the landowner goes into

town and sees those who are not working, they tell him it is because no one has hired them. The day was almost over and they had nothing to show for it. The fact that they were still there indicates how desperate they must have been. They were hoping against hope that they might catch a break, that somehow someone would help just a little so they would be able to provide for their families.

But there is a line in the parable that is very subtle and so it is easy to overlook. When the landowner goes back into town at various points in the day, it does not say that they agree on what they will be paid. Instead he tells these late workers, "I will pay what is right or just." He does not say I will pay you what is fair but what is just. The word that is used here is a Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for justice found in Micah 6:8. You know that verse: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before your God?" It is not what is fair, but what is just. Justice is need-based not earned-based. Your children will not go hungry tonight even if you work only for an hour, the landowner says, because I will be just.

So when I say it is 5:00 somewhere for someone, I am not talking about kicking back with a cold drink and forgetting about what a tough day you had at work. I am talking about people all over this world, but right here in our own community as well, that are desperate for justice. Their needs are great. They feel overwhelmed and hope is just about gone. They do not know what they are going to do. They need someone to show them some kindness and humbly walk with them before God.

One example of these 5:00 people is the story in the news this week of Oscar and Irma Sanchez. They have a two-month old baby boy that was in need of emergency surgery and so they had to cross a U.S. Customs and Border Protection checkpoint to get him to Driscoll Children's Hospital in Corpus Christi, TX. When they arrived at the hospital they were arrested by Border Patrol agents, because they were undocumented. Fortunately, they were allowed to remain at the hospital while their son was having surgery, but agents were with them around the clock, even when they used the rest room, or when Irma was nursing her son. Their status is all up in the air as the baby recovers. Now, I know that the situation is complicated, and it may have been perfectly legal. The officers insisted they were only doing their job. I am even willing to admit that it might have been fair. The officers were trying to treat everyone the same. But it was not kind. It was not decent. It was not humane. *It was not just!!* It is not the way of God's Beloved Community. As followers of Jesus Christ who are working for this community, our priorities must be need-based not earned-based. If someone is hurting, needy, struggling, desperate, we are to help them; end of story. It doesn't matter if they deserve it. It doesn't matter if it is fair. It does not matter if they are here illegally.

If we find this troubling it might be necessary to look at what has been going on in the Gospel of Matthew up to this point. Two weeks ago I preached on Matthew 18 about conflict in the church, and I talked about how we must work to restore harmony whenever problems arise. Last week, Pastor Beth preached on the following verses with Peter coming to Jesus and asking if he should forgive someone up to seven times. Jesus said we should always be ready to forgive.

In between last week's passage and today's is an interesting story that has been skipped over. It is the account of the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks what he needs to do in order to be saved. Jesus told him he had to sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, and come and follow him. Again Jesus is calling for a need-based economy over earned-based economy. Well, you probably remember that the young man went away sad because he could not bear to part with his possessions. After all, he had earned them.

After the rich young man walks away, once again Peter speaks up. He essentially says, "Hey, Lord, we gave up everything we have to follow you. So we got it covered, don't we? I mean, we are in. We are saved. We win, don't we?"

Peter is trying to figure out some sort of logical mathematical formula to God's love and grace. If I do A then B then C then D, I can count on God's favor can't I? He wants it all laid out on what exactly he needs to do. He wants a number on how many times he is supposed to forgive. Jesus replies there is no number. He points out that the disciples were the first to follow Jesus and so they must be first when the blessings, the goodies are handed out.

With our parable, Jesus is saying, "Yes, it is true, Peter. If you do A, B, C and D, you win. But you know what? Even if you do just A, B, and C, you still win. In fact, if you do just B or D you still win. Everyone wins. Everyone gets the blessings. Everyone gets the goodies when they are handed out. You only lose if you get mad because there are no losers.

I don't know about you, but I often find myself thinking like Peter. I think of myself as one of those 6:00 in the morning workers. I really try hard to do what I am supposed to do. I follow the rules and I work hard trying to build up God's Beloved Community. I read the Bible and I pray. I try to be generous and help others. I really do what I can to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before God. I would dare say that most of us here this morning feel that way. We are here in this beautiful sanctuary with the sunlight beaming through these windows. We support the Food Pantry and Marion Cares. We give to hurricane relief. We have been working hard for God. We have to be one of those 6:00 in the morning workers, don't we?

Well, I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that we are all 5:00 p.m. workers. Compared to what God has done for us, and all that needs to be done, we haven't done much at all. Do you really think God is impressed by our stained glass windows and the amount of money we drop in the plate each week? Sorry, but not really. We have showed up too late. That's the bad news. Here is the good news. It doesn't matter. Even though we showed up at 5:00, we still get paid. We still get the blessings, the goodies. We win anyway. That is real good news.

Shel Silverstein was a poet, artist, musician and composer. I began this sermon talking about country music and you might remember a hit by Johnnie Cash called "A Boy Named Sue." Well, Shel Silverstein wrote those lyrics along with a lot of other stuff. But my favorite of Silverstein's works is actually a children's book of poems called *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. I read those poems many times to my boys when they were little. They are now reading them to their daughters. One of those poems goes like this:

I will not play at tug o' war.  
I'd rather play at hug o' war,  
Where everyone hugs  
Instead of tugs,  
Where everyone giggles  
And rolls on the rug,  
Where everyone kisses,  
And everyone grins  
And everyone cuddles  
And everyone wins.<sup>1</sup>

Tug o' war is earned based. Those who are the strongest and the best deserve to win in a tug o' war. We keep asking God how to win at tug o' war. God answers, "I only play at hug o' war. Everyone kisses, everyone grins, everyone cuddles, and everyone wins." So, maybe it is not fair, but it certainly is right and just. It is exactly what we need, because after all, it is five o'clock somewhere. Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, by Shel Silverstein, published by Harper and Row in 1974, page 19.