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Gospel lesson

After last week's reading about how many times we should forgive, Jesus dealt with questions about the law, who would get into heaven, and who would get the greatest rewards. He told Peter, "[E]veryone who has left [home, family, or business] for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." That brings us to:



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/lumo-workers-vineyard/>;
courtesy of Lumo Project Films - www.lumoproject.com

Matthew 20:1-16

NRSVue

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

² After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard.

³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,

⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.

⁶ 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?'

⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'

⁸ 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.'

⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius.

¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.

¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,

¹² 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.'

¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius?

¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.

¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am

generous?’

¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The Word of God for the people of God

<Children's/Interactive time>

Is life fair? <Let them respond>

What can make you upset about unfairness in life?
<Let them respond>

What can you do about it? <Let them respond>

Sometimes the unfairness and stress of life can feel overwhelming. How bad can it get? <Let them respond>

Not everyone feels as well-connected with others as Paul was. Not everyone feels [they have a purpose in life worth living for] all the time. Some people despair so much, they think about giving up on life.

Dear person behind me,
the world is a better place
with you in it
love,
the person in front of you
you are enough.

*wording copied from
DearPersonCo shirt,
back and front*

You may have seen these “Dear person” shirts. <Show>
The owners say they founded the company in honor of lost loved ones (a mom, a sister) and a desire to prevent others from experiencing what they did.

Who is hurt when someone commits suicide? Is it only the person(s) causing the victim stress/pain/

hopelessness? <Let them respond>

Often is is people the victim would never want to hurt who suffer the most following a suicide. Do you know the UMC stance on suicide? <Let them respond>

From <https://www.umc.org/en/content/what-united-methodists-can-do-about-suicide>: The United Methodist Church affirms that every life is sacred and that suicide does not separate a person from the grace and love of God. We are called to respond to people experiencing suicidal thoughts – and to those grieving a suicide loss – with compassion, hope and support rather than judgment or stigma.

Did you know that September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month? What can we do to help prevent it? <Let them respond>

In the US and Canada, people can **call or text 988** for help during crisis; and we can take them to the ER if needed. Before they get to that point, we can:

- † Pay attention – take comments seriously and notice significant changes in behavior such as withdrawal, extreme mood changes, and looking for ways to die.
- † If concerned, ask them directly if they are thinking about suicide, to let them talk honestly. You are not going to put thoughts in their mind that are not already there by asking about it if you have observed concerning signs.
- † Listen without judgment. Be present and let them express their feelings as valid.
- † Help keep them safe. While their feelings are real,

their choices about how to act on them may not be rational. Try to keep harmful items out of reach.

† Help them connect with professional support.

And as for you, if you start to wonder what's the point of living, remember: God is not finished with you yet. I know that because you are here. You still have the capacity to show love and to work for God's kingdom (even if only through listening), with the promise of eternal life in joy and peace to come.

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The world truly is a better place with you in it – let us always give God thanks for one another and strive, side by side, in service to Jesus, to make God's kingdom more evident on this earth.

<Hymn "O Jesus, I Have Promised"

UMH #396>

Message: Striving Side by Side



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/pressing-on-worship-series/week-1-seventeenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a/week-1-seventeenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-pressing-on-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Holy Lord who calls us to live life abundantly,
as we take time now to further consider today's
scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That in our striving, both we and those by our side

may know You better and share in Your grace. Amen.

We begin a new sermon series today, “Pressing On” with “Striving Side by Side.”

“One of the key points to remember throughout this series is that we are not called to wear ourselves out. Pressing on is not about throwing ourselves against brick walls with no regard for our own well-being.”

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I was with a person who was very stressed about needing to make a phone call. Unfortunately, it was too late for the phone call to be of any use, but the person was still fretting about it, wanting to disrupt what they needed to be doing in order to take care of the phone call.

Once I understood the situation, I was able to help the person calm down through use of a breath prayer – much like the one we used at the start of this service, only “Breathe in the Holy Spirit, breathe out the anxiety; God has this in hand. Breathe in the Holy Spirit, breathe out the anxiety; you are okay.”

A day or two later I was feeling overwhelmed with stress that I could not control, and I remembered how the person calmed with that prayer, so I tried it myself. Opening myself to the Lord, I could feel the truth of the prayer, that God is with us and that things would work out without my fretting about it.

We do not always reap the benefits of sharing God’s love so directly afterward, but God is always with

us, ready to help us with what truly we need – even when we forget that.

Remember last week, the Israelites were at a faith high, never going to doubt God again, right? Well after leaving the sea they crossed behind them, they started to panic after three days in the wilderness without finding water. Moses took the matter to God, and from a split in a rock, water gushed forth.

This week, the people are upset that they do not have a ready source of food, and instead of humbling themselves and asking God for help, they start telling Moses that (even after all they went through) they should have stayed in Egypt! Where was their faith?

Moses was right to tell them that their complaints were against the Lord. Where is our faith when we forget the blessings we have and complain about not having what we want? How much are we complaining at God instead of giving thanks and humbly asking for help when we need it?

Yet, even when we lack faith, God is steadfast and provides the ability for our needs to be met. What is more, because God wants to build relationships with us where we feel valued, God gives us the ability to contribute to the situation too.

I am reminded of the dairy farmer who explained to his son that cows do not give milk. They produce it, but they do not put it in a pail for the farmer – the farmer has to take it from them. That work is

required every day that they want to have milk.

Similarly, the Israelites did not have pots of meat magically appear; they had to gather up the quails and manna the Lord provided for them. All the people, striving side by side, were able to get food to sustain them on a daily basis – and in so doing, an enduring faith community formed, people of one mind about trusting in God – every day – to provide for them, because God is steadfast.

In our human communities, we tend to develop hierarchies, often with the people who have been members longer having higher standing than newer members. However, in the Lord's eyes, we are all equally children of God. Whether we grew up in the church, joined as younger adults, or joined as older adults, all of us are asked by God to show the love of Jesus to others through the power of the Holy Spirit in this world for the time we have remaining.

I noticed that in Jesus's parable today, it was never mentioned that the vineyard owner actually needed workers, just that he kept hiring them. The rich landowner was helping the poor to survive, providing them with ability to collect a daily wage, much as God provided manna and quails for the Israelites to collect in the desert.

God has so many blessings to bestow upon us, and does not want us taking them – or God – for granted. Yet we fuss about who is more worthy of what reward. None of us **deserve** anything; God is generous with us. Let us show our gratitude to the Lord by striving side by

side in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Whatever you are going through, especially if it seems difficult, trust God – it will get better. Do all that you can in the meantime to strengthen your relationship with God through prayer, reading scripture, meditation, etc.

And as Jesus commanded, love one another. Connect with others because relationships give us reason to keep striving, just as Paul kept striving for the sake of the Philippians. Develop relationships with more than just one other person to lean on, because people are only human and sometimes God will have to work through others. Especially look to your siblings in Christ, for we know we have been shown God's mercy and hopefully can share God's grace all the better for it.

Press on, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, not just believing in Christ but willing to struggle for Him as well, that one day we may all be blessed with eternal life of joy, love, and peace in God's kingdom.