

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
LABOR DAY SUNDAY  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
SEPTEMBER 6, 2009  
“THE MORAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LABOR  
AND MANAGEMENT”  
Matthew 20:1-16  
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is an appropriate text for meditation on Labor Day. It speaks of labor and management in the perspective of the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The parable is about labors seeking work and an employer who hires them to work in his business. The owner of a vineyard is concerned about getting sufficient labor to bring in a harvest of grapes. So he bargains with some laborers at six o'clock in the morning. He offers them a fair wage which they accept and go to work. But he needs more workers and goes to the market place again at nine o'clock and finds unemployed men. These were men seeking to work, but who had not been hired. The owner of the vineyard returns there at noon and again at three in the afternoon and hires more workers. Finally at five, one hour before closing time, he sends still more men to work.

It is obvious that this story took place before the creation of unions and, of course, these were all non-union workers. At six o'clock the owner of the vineyard had his foreman line up the laborers to be paid. He began with those who had worked but an hour. He paid them for a full day.

Watching this were those who had worked since six in the morning. They rubbed their hands in delight, thinking to themselves, **“If he pays them a full day’s wage for working just part of a day, think how much he will pay us!”** But when their time came, they also received the standard wage for one day’s work. They were mad. They had worked all day and were receiving the same amount as those who had worked just one hour. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t just. But the landowner said, **“*Didn’t I pay you what we had agreed on? If I want to be more generous with these others is it not my right? Is it not my money to do with as I please?*”**

Now that's a hard teaching, particularly when applied to the subject of minorities entering the labor force. Some of these men worked 12 hours and some of them worked one hour and they all got paid the same! Separate, but equal! Now that's wonderful, but is it fair?

Those who had worked in the vineyard would not have been at all dissatisfied with what they had received if they had not compared their wages with what the others had received. There is something very human about that. What is there within us that judges our lives not on the basis of what we have received, but on the basis of what we have received in relation to others? Jesus added these cryptic words, ***“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”***

That's a difficult concept for many of us to accept. We were taught that if we work hard we will get ahead. If we work hard, our parents will be proud of us. If we work hard, we will be good citizens and good role models. And all of that is true. But being black in the labor force of the 1920's meant that none of your good work was good enough to gain you entrance into the major labor unions of the time.

But all of that changed in 1925 when A. Philip Randolph organized the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids. Black Americans were always the **“last hired and the first fired”** in the American workplace. But unlike the workers in the Gospel story, they were never paid the same wages for the same work.

It was not until 1938 when the United States Congress passed a law called **“The Fair Labor and Practice Act.”** That law established for the first time in our history a minimum wage. It was set at 25 cents an hour. My father picked cotton for 25 cents a day. He was told that he was not worth 25 cents an hour. **“The Fair Labor and Practice Act”** was based on two principles: First of all, everyone must make a minimum wage; second, there should be some semblance of equal pay for equal work.

The International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids became the first [African American](#) labor union to be chartered by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The Pullman porters, who worked on trains, were hired to serve the needs of **“whites”**. They did the job for which they were hired. Some people treated them kindly and some did not. Their dissatisfaction; however, was not with the people they served, but with their

treatment by the company that had hired them. The Pullman Porters made beds, kept their clients on schedule and provided personal services around the clock.

In the Gospel story, those who had worked in the vineyard would not have been at all dissatisfied with what they had received if they had not compared their wages with what the others had received. The Pullman Porters never grumbled about wages, only about the lack of dignity with how they were treated. Their call for human dignity changed our country forever. Our Lord said, ***“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”*** Now here we are in 2009 when many people are unemployed. Who will find them and say: ***“You also go into the vineyard, (into my company, into my business) and whatever is right you will receive”?*** (v.7)

***“Whatever is right”?*** You see, even Jesus thought it was a privilege for a worker to be placed in a position to earn wages. By providing work for the unemployed, an employer is actually showing kindness and goodness. I pray that all who are unemployed will find fulltime work for fulltime pay, regardless of what time of the day you are hired.

The moral relationship between labor and management means a full day’s work for a full day’s pay. That is consistent with Unions and the Labor Relations Board who say that wages earned should correspond to work done. But Jesus goes even further to lift up the generosity of an employer who goes beyond the requirement of the law to pay even more than what is required. Therefore, let us not become envious or jealous when some are on the receiving end of more generosity than we think we may have received. It is only important that we received what is fair, what is right. Because of God’s grace no one ever gets less than they deserve. This is the gospel for Labor Day.

As we celebrate Labor Day this year, we lift up the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids and Winfred W. Seymour, Sr., who served as its International Secretary-Treasurer. And if you are among the unemployed, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.