

**Fruitful Labor**  
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**Philippians 1:21-30**

<sup>21</sup>For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; <sup>24</sup>but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. <sup>25</sup>Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, <sup>26</sup>so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

<sup>27</sup> Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup>and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. <sup>29</sup>For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—<sup>30</sup>since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

**Matthew 20:1-16**

<sup>1</sup>For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>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?" <sup>7</sup>They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." <sup>8</sup>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." <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>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? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.” It’s not often we get to listen in on such intimate thoughts of Paul. In prison for the umpteenth time, and in the days well before prisoner rights, Paul faces the real possibility of death. He is more than content with dying - he is considering how much he might prefer it, looking ahead to the heavenly reward of which he has assured so many others in his letters of encouragement and education to the churches. To be done with the hard

work he has done, to be done with the persecution and the questioning and the imprisonment and the traveling by means which are far from luxurious.

Perhaps you know what he means; perhaps you can sympathize. Maybe you look forward to reunion with those who have gone before you, family and friends who have died and who are still missed to this day. Perhaps life is rough right now and heaven sounds a whole lot easier. Maybe you are acutely aware of the struggles of striving toward Christian goals with our human limitations. How many weeks in a year, how many years in a lifetime do we hear in this setting of church how great our rewards in heaven will be? In comparison, this human existence doesn't sound so great.

Paul, who knew these struggles - remember, he is the one who said, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" - this Paul, who was beaten and imprisoned for his beliefs, is the same Paul who continues: "to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith." If Paul, in such horrible circumstances, chose to continue to labor, and fruitfully, so can we. Rest assured, our times will inevitably come - just not yet - so stay busy. Paul was convinced there was still work to be done. Until Christ comes again, there *is* still work to be done.

It's a bit easier to turn away from our own personal desires for relief from the toils of this earth, a bit easier to embrace the work to be done, when our hearts are full of gratitude for God's grace and mercy, when our actions are grateful responses to God's grace and mercy. Toady's reading from Matthew helps us re-mind ourselves of God's generosity. Many a theologian has, and will, suggest that the laborers hired early can be likened to long-time church members and the laborers hired later are the newer Christians or those in our churches who are less involved. Sure, in that understanding, God's generosity is still outside of, and greater than, our understanding of what is fair and what is not. However, something caught my eye when I was reading and re-reading this text this week.

When the landowner went to hire those laborers who came on last, "he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.'" We don't often catch this part of the story - we rush on to the indignant early workers who expected more money than a day's wages. We tend to look at this story through the eyes of employers and employees. However, if we look at it through the eyes of middle-schoolers, a similar but different message emerges. Much like being picked for teams in gym class, there would have been day laborers you would want and day laborers you would only take if they were the last ones available. Maybe some of these men had bad reputations, maybe some were suspected thieves, maybe some were known to be lazy or troublemakers. Whatever the reasons, landowners "in the know" chose to pick everyone else but these guys. And yet this landowner still chose to hire them. Curious.

In this light, this story becomes about those who don't usually get a chance to be treated and rewarded like everyone else, for whatever reason, being regarded more highly and treated more equally. The early laborers, who were made to watch as these later laborers were paid for a full day's work, cried "unfair!" We are all too familiar with unfairness. We know the unfairness of this world and it's not good. One in seven people are hungry. The world's richest one percent hold 40% of the wealth. There are urban neighborhoods with no access to fresh vegetables but a plethora of fast food options. People get ahead because of who they know instead of what they can do. Governments imprison people because they dare speak out against injustices. Six million people are killed because they fit an "undesirable" profile. The world is rife with this kind of unfairness - I could spend the morning naming ways and still not be done. But this world is not what we're talking about. Jesus begins this parable in Matthew with "For the kingdom of heaven is like..." The unfairness is God's unfairness. With the unfairness of the kingdom, no one loses; all benefit.

The early laborers complain, "you have made them equal to us." Everyone was rewarded in the same way and they saw it as an injustice. God sees it differently. No one is above another. Everyone is equal no matter what we do or for how long we do it. If you come from a family with siblings, it's likely, if you ever asked, that you were told by a parent that you and your siblings were loved equally. While we all know that's often simply the right thing to say, with God, it's also the truth. Every time we pray "*thy* kingdom come," in that moment, if we're really attuned, we're trying to see the world as God does. We're praying that we can let go of the ways this world, of thinking in the ways we do in this world and, instead, think as God does, see others as God does. We try to stop scorekeeping and judging and comparing and rating. When we succeed, because sometimes we do, we have a spark of comprehension of the magnitude and the unconditional-ness of God's love for us and for every last person around us. And we are overwhelmed in the face of such unmerited generosity.

Our natural response in those moments, like Paul's, is to live a life giving glory to God, a life marked by fruitful labor. Begrudging labor, labor because we are obligated turns out very different results than labors of love do. When I work in my yard the results are far different than when I ask my son or husband to work in the yard. They do it because they know it will help me out and they do a good job. When I work in my yard, I take my time - in fact, I could spend all day in the yard, even past dusk, and I have. A well-weeded garden, with carefully managed and fertilized soil produces better fruits, better plants than a garden carelessly tended. If we do what we do because we can think of no better way to give thanks to God, then our labor is fruitful. If we cannot keep from looking over our shoulder, to be sure we are working harder than the next person, or to keep track of all the ways the other could be working better, our labors surely suffer and the products of our labors are lacking.

Does this mean that, if we are laboring well, we will produce big results? Not necessarily. We can give glory to God in ways big and small - the importance is not in the size but in the intent. On an individual level, we don't need to make the news; we don't even need to have our acts recognized by another. Something as simple as a kind word or gesture, if done to be loving as Christ has loved us, gives God glory. Even refraining from an unkind word is good fruit. Good fruit is not measured only in physical impact. Mission trips and food pantries and Habitat for Humanity are fantastic but they can limit who can participate. Giving glory to God has no limits beyond your imagination.

As part of the body of Christ as a congregation gathered in this community, small gestures count here, too. If our mission giving only ever remained local, but was done because we feel called to do so out of response to God's love for us, then our labors are fruitful. Next month we will have some opportunities to talk together about who we understand the congregation of First Presbyterian Church to be and what it is we feel we are called to do in loving response to God. Even if we uncover only one thing we are called to, then we can do it well and with all our hearts and, in so doing, give glory to God. Look at The Caring Place, an outreach that we heard the call to provide in the community. Fruitful, indeed. In the October newsletter, I'll offer some questions to help each of us start pondering how to answer the questions of who we are and what we are called to do. Paul was convinced there was work still to be done. No matter your stage in life, no matter whether this church is here for five more years, fifty years, or five hundred, there is work to be done and we, as a people, are called to do it. As we think on what it is we feel compelled to do, consider not your limits or the limits of this church. If we discern God's will for us and for this church correctly, God *will* provide a means to help us answer that call.

Let us pray: Generous God, there is work still to be done. We know our efforts can never measure up to the reward you have promised. We pray for focus that we might do our best in giving you glory. Amen.