“Sour Grapes in the Vineyard” (Matthew 20:1-16)

When someone expresses negativity about a situation after the fact, only after they’ve been disappointed about the outcome--we call that kind of a reaction “sour grapes.” A candidate loses an election, and then afterward he says some nasty stuff about those dumb voters who chose the other guy. That’s “sour grapes.” A person loses out on a job promotion, and then he speaks behind the back of the employer he was just flattering. Again, sour grapes. It’s not a very noble characteristic, this sour-grapes attitude. But it is a very common reaction among us self-centered sinners. We all do it from time to time, in one form or another. Sometimes we even vent our negativity on God, blaming him for letting this disappointing situation happen to us: “I’m not getting what is due me, and it is God’s fault.” When you and I have this attitude, when we entertain these thoughts, when we express such words, we are engaging in sour grapes.

In the Gospel today, Jesus addresses this grumbling sour-grapes attitude. You just heard the Gospel, but I would briefly like to recap it : A man hires some laborers to go work in his vineyard. They agree on a wage. More workers come along a little later. “Whatever is right I will give you,” the master tells them. Same thing a couple hours later. Then even as the end of the workday is approaching, the master sends out still more workers. The whistle blows, the workers assemble, they get their paychecks. The first group of workers get the pay they had agreed upon. But when they find out the master has paid the late coming workers the same amount he’s paid them, these first workers get upset. They begin to grumble: “How come we don’t get more? This isn’t fair! We worked longer and harder than those other guys. You owe us more, master!” Sour grapes in the vineyard.

Now in Jesus’ story, the master, of course, is God. The vineyard is the kingdom of God. And the laborers are those who work in God’s kingdom. You see, this sour-grapes attitude is a real temptation especially for the most dedicated members of the church. We think because we’ve been slaving away diligently for years, in the service of the church that nothing could be more praise worthy. We think we deserve all the appreciation and the applause we can get. And when we don’t get it, we feel slighted, unappreciated. To make matters worse, if someone comes along who hasn’t worked as long or as hard as we have, and that person now gets as much as or even more recognition than we are getting--well, now we get a little angry! Our “grump-ometer” begins to grumble. We are steamed and we stew. We resent that other person. We get mad at the people who are applauding them instead of us. And of course, we grumble and get mad at God for letting this happen. Sour grapes in the vineyard.

We might have never thought that the workers later in the day were probably those who were disabled, elderly or unable to do the same amount of work as those earlier workers who were more than likely young and strong. The workers hired at the end of the day probably needed the money more than those hired earlier.

This sour grapes syndrome is a real disease isn’t it? We may be outwardly respectable people in most all features of our lives, very moral, hard-working and dedicated. In fact, these are many times the people who are most susceptible to getting “Sour Grapes Syndrome.” It’s people like you and me.

But when I participate in this sour grapes attitude, my priorities are really out of whack. No, let’s call it something stronger: I am committing sin, for I have just put myself above the work of the vineyard. The truth is, it ain’t about me. I just work here. The vineyard is all about Jesus.

Has there ever been anyone more underappreciated than Jesus? Has anyone ever been treated more unfairly? No, not by a long shot. Here was our Lord, God’s own Son, coming into the vineyard and outworking anyone who’s ever set foot there. He only spent a few years in His public ministry, but, oh, the results! So many sick people healed from their diseases. Multitudes fed and taught. The preaching of repentance and forgiveness. What a worker for God’s kingdom! And what reward did He receive? Rejection, humiliation, abandonment, persecution and unjust suffering. A death sentence, cruel death on a cross, hung out to die. What kind of a reward is that for the best worker ever in the vineyard?

But this is precisely how Christ won the great reward that each one of us will receive in the end. And that reward will be based, not on our works, but His. It won’t matter how long you’ve been a Christian or how many years of dedicated service you put in along the way.

Any reward that we receive at all comes to us only by the Grace of God. Forgiveness of sins, eternal life, these are ours solely because of Christ’s death and resurrection, not because of our labors. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

As I say, it won’t matter how long we have been in the vineyard or how much dedicated service we put in. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a good thing, a tremendous blessing to be working in the vineyard our whole life. Consider yourself fortunate if that describes you. I’m all in favor of us putting in many years of dedicated service in the cause of the Gospel. This is great. But that is not the basis of our salvation. And it doesn’t mean that we won’t be underappreciated along the way. To the contrary, count on it. This is part of bearing our cross, this underappreciation.

But even if people don’t appreciate our efforts, know that our heavenly Father, who sees what is done in secret does. In fact, he’s planned out our good works ahead of us, and he gives us the strength to do them, even when we are not getting a whole lot of positive reinforcement.

And so, my fellow workers in the vineyard, our loving God does not care whether we arrived in the vineyard at sunrise, noon or sunset, one day our master will welcome us home greeting us with these beautiful words, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.”