

September 20, 2026

A Day of Surprises

By Pr. Beate Chun

What time is it?

Grace to you and peace
from the one who is
and the one who was
and the one who is to come.

What time is it?
[Pause. People look at their watches and phones.]

Anybody? [People respond.]

We usually know what time it is.
Wristwatches and smartphones
are always at hand
to tell us what time it is.
And if there is ever a moment
when we are without such a device,
we can always turn to a neighbor:
What time is it?

We live by the clock.
The alarm goes off in the morning
and off we go
into a day that is divided
into hours
and minutes
and seconds.

I wonder what the days
were like in the time of Jesus,
when there were no wristwatches
or smartphones,
when no alarms went off in the morning?

A whole day

Today we heard a story
from the Gospel of Matthew
that gives us a sense of a day
in the time of Jesus.

We get to accompany
a group of people
from early morning
until evening.

The story begins early in the morning
with a householder
who goes out to the marketplace
to hire laborers for his vineyard.
Then, at nine o'clock,
he goes again
and hires more laborers.
Then at noon,
he goes again.
And at three o'clock
he goes again.
And then, once more,
at five o'clock.
So, over the course of the day,
he has made five trips
to the market!
That's a lot of market trips!

What about you?
What does a typical day
look like for you?
What does your morning look like?
And your midday?
And your afternoon?

Now let's consider another group
of people: the laborers.
The first group gets hired
at the beginning of the day,
and there is a clear agreement:
They will be paid
one denarius
for a day's worth of work.
From what I read,
this seems to have been
a standard agreement.

A surprise at five o'clock

The next group of hires
also have an agreement,
but it is less clear:
“I will pay you whatever is right.”
That could mean anything.
But at this point,
with the day advancing,
the laborers will probably
agree to anything.

And the same is true
each time he hires more laborers.
Then evening comes.
The owner of the vineyard
says 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
come forward,
each of them receives
a denarius.

A whole denarius!
What a surprise!
And what a relief.
They have a day's wage,
enough to provide
for the needs of their family.

The other workers
watch what is happening.
Such a generous householder!
Surely we will get paid
very well today!

Then it is their turn.
They each receive a denarius.

“What? That's all?
All we get is a denarius?”

“Yes.
That is what was agreed
at the beginning.”

“Wait a minute!
How can you do that?
These last workers
worked only one hour!

How can they get paid
the same as us?
We have borne
the burden and the heat of the day,
and they only worked an hour!
And now we all get paid
the same!
That's not fair!"

We only see our own day

I can understand those workers,
can't you?
I can understand
their frustration
and disappointment.
It is a hard pill to swallow.

But the thing is,
these workers only see the day
from their own point of view.
They see their own sweat.
Their own labor.
Their own tired bodies.
Which is something
we human beings tend to do.
We enter a situation
and things get complicated,
but we see only
our own point of view.

Here is a story.
A man was on his way to work,
running a little late,
when he realized he was out of gas.
Yikes.

So he pulled into a gas station.
And, of course,
every pump was busy.
So now he had to wait.

The car in front of him
stopped at a pump.
The door opened,
and a woman got out.
She walked around the car.
She wandered a little.
She looked at the pump.
She walked back.
She looked around again.

And the man thought:
What now?
Come on.
Hurry up.
I don't have all day.
The woman continued
to wander around.
Finally she walked
toward his car.
And now he thought:

Now what?
What does she want?
But he rolled down his window.
And she said:
"Can you please help me?
I don't know how to get gas.
I've never done it before.
It was always my husband
who did that.
But he died last week.

So now I have to figure out
how to get gas.”

And something changed.
The man later said
that his heart melted.
Because his own wife
had died a year before.
And he knew what it was like
to have to move forward
when everything has changed.

Now he saw the woman
with new eyes.
She was no longer
an inconvenience.
She was a person.
A person carrying grief.
And once he could see that,
his heart opened.

No one has hired us

The man at the gas station was lucky.
He had an opportunity
to discover what was the matter
with the woman
and why she acted
the way she did.

The laborers in the vineyard
didn't have that opportunity.
They could only see
their own sweat and hard labor.

They could not see
that those who were hired at five o'clock
likewise had a day
full of burdens.

Imagine:
to get up early
in the morning
when the cock crowed
and to hurry to the marketplace
looking for work,
only to be passed over
again
and again
and again.

They see the householder
coming back at nine,
and then at noon,
and each time
they get their hopes up,
and each time
they are left behind.

“What about us?
Don't we also have
a pair of good hands?
Don't we also have
strong arms
and a back willing
to shoulder burdens?”

Then it is three o'clock,
and the day begins to wane,
and hope is quickly fading.

And then, surprisingly,
the householder returns
and hires more workers!
At three o'clock!

And still they are left behind.

Why stay in the marketplace
at this point?
The day is far advanced.
What chance is there now?

And then the householder comes
one last time.
“Why are you standing idle?”
he wants to know.

What a question!
As if they had a choice.
They wouldn't be idle
if they could help it!
“No one has hired us,”
they say.
No one.
And then, finally,
it happens.
“I will hire you.
Go and work in my vineyard.”
What a surprise,
to be hired at five o'clock!

That was how the day had gone
for those last workers.
No, they did not sweat
and they did not have to do
heavy labor.

But their day
surely had burdens of its own.

So so, each in their own way
has borne the heat and the burden
of the day.

When the day is done

And now the day is done.
The day has ended for all of them:
those who labored in the vineyard
for twelve long hours,
and those who lived through a day
of worry and anxiety.
It is finished.
Everyone's struggle is finished.

And so it is for us.
When we get up in the morning,
we never know
what the day will bring,
what joys and struggles
will come our way.
And then evening comes.
And the day is done.
And we have to make our peace
with whatever has happened.

There is something else
I cannot help but hear in this story.
The Gospel of Matthew loves to tell us
what time it is.

And so there is another day
in Matthew's Gospel

which is marked by the clock:
morning,
noon,
and three o'clock.
It is the day of Jesus' crucifixion.
Jesus, too,
knows the heat
and burden of the day.

And there is no human day
not even the hardest
that Christ has not entered.
The day of work.
The day of waiting.
The day of anxiety.
The day of suffering.
The day of grief.
The day when we don't know
what will happen next.
Christ has entered all of it.

And then, eventually,
the day comes to an end.
There is an evening prayer
that I find wonderfully comforting.
It goes like this:

Gracious Lord,
we give you thanks for the day,
especially for the good
we were permitted
to give and receive;
the day is now past,
and we commit it to you.
We entrust to you the night;
we rest in security,
for you are our help,

and you neither slumber
nor sleep.

Amen.

Sermon for Sunday, September 20, 2026

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Text: [Matthew 20:1-16 NRSVue - The Laborers in the Vineyard - "For - Bible Gateway](#)

Tags: Labor | Worry | Fairness | Comfort at the end of the day