

Sunday, September 20, 2026
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20A)
Matthew 20.1-16
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“You Have Made Them Equal to Us”

Lately, I have been thinking about the subject of “original sin,” as one does in one’s free time. In Christian theology, original sin is the condition of human sinfulness and guilt that we all inherit from the first humans, Adam and Eve, due to their disobedience in the Garden of Eden. That disobedience being their going against the single command God gave them that they are not to eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Which, as we know from Genesis Chapter 3, Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent, who told them that if they did eat of the fruit, “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen 3.5). And we all know what happened. They ate the forbidden fruit. And things just went downhill from there.

Now, admittedly, the doctrine of original sin is not without controversy, particularly in many expressions of Protestant Christianity. Without going into all the gory theological details, I think it is fairly safe, at least for our purposes here, to boil the idea of original sin down to its basics and to recognize that humans, by nature, are imperfect creatures and are subject to sin. As defined in the catechism in our own *Book of Common Prayer*, “Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation” (BCP, 848).

We often hear “original sin” bandied about in various contexts. Not just the Christian doctrine stemming from Genesis Chapter 3. In a more generic context, “original sin” being a fundamental, systemic flaw or an initial misstep at the beginning of an endeavor that continues to cause problems from there on out. A classic example of this being that you often hear reference to slavery as our nation’s original sin. We have a parishioner with whom I enjoy having political discussions, and we have talked about this national original sin. Her take is that slavery is not America’s original sin, but greed. Which makes a lot of sense. It was because of greed, the desire to produce more and more, that led to the use of slave labor in the first place.

As I’ve thought about this, it seems to me that the original sin of Adam and Eve was also, in a way, about greed. About wanting more than what God so graciously provided. About wanting more than what they truly needed. After all, God gave them everything else in the Garden of Eden for their use and enjoyment. There was only one thing they could not have. And yet, because it was the one thing they could not have, they decided they had to have it. Although, I would say this was not so much greed as it was hubris. It was not so much greed as it was a sense of entitlement. That they felt they were entitled to special privilege or benefit without earning it.

And if you think about, so much of the ills of human history ever since have been based on this original sin of greed and entitlement. People taking what they want from others, by subversion, by coercion, by war, just because they want it and feel they are entitled to it. Because they view themselves as being better than others, more privileged, more entitled. Just because. If anything, this is our original sin as a species. While we could undoubtedly debate that, let’s run with it for purposes of this sermon.

When I first read today's Gospel lesson, my mind immediately went to this Fincher-modified working definition of original sin and how the responses of the workers in the parable—namely those who worked the longest—derive from, are motivated by, the original sin of entitlement. In the parable, Jesus lays out a scenario seeking to explain to his audience what the kingdom of God is like. Of what God is like. Of how God operates. As we heard, a landowner hires some laborers for his vineyard first thing in the morning, agreeing to pay them the usual daily wage of a denarius. As the day wears on, it is obvious there is more work to be done than these laborers can possibly accomplish. So, several times throughout the day, the landowner hires additional laborers—at noon, at three, and again at five. Never mentioning the financial arrangements agreed upon. Leaving it to all to assume they would be paid a fair wage for the work they did. Be it six hours, three hours, or one hour.

As we heard, at the end of the day, when it came time to pay his laborers, he started with those hired last and paid in reverse order of hire. When he paid the ones who only worked an hour a full-days wages, the others thought, "Wow, that surely means we will get far more than a denarius, because we worked far more." But no. Each laborer was given the same amount, regardless of how long they worked. Those who worked longer were incensed, perceiving that they had been wronged in not being paid more. Although, they were not cheated out of anything. They had agreed to do a day's work for a denarius. And that is what they got. Precisely what had been agreed to. Despite their thinking that they would, that they should, get more, they had been treated fairly. Now, given what we are told, we really can't get into the minds of those who grumbled. Some probably thought they should be paid more. And some probably thought that those who worked less should be paid less. Regardless, it all boils down to their sense of entitlement that they should get a greater wage than the others—however the math works out. This sense of entitlement is indicated in their comment to the landowner, "you have made them equal to us."

"You have made them equal to us." A statement that is beautiful and welcoming, or ugly and divisive, depending on tone and context. In the mouths of those who worked longer, "you have made them equal to us" is the latter. Ugly and divisive. They have judged those who worked less to be less worthy. They resent the landowner's actions, his generosity, because it erases their sense of entitlement. It erases the pecking order they have perceived because of that entitlement. It does not celebrate the others being "elevated" in status, but laments their perceived sense of being "demoted" in status.

How often has this expression of "you have made them equal to us" been implied, if not outright uttered with contempt, through the history of humanity. All because of our original sin of entitlement. Just consider the history of our own nation. At its founding, the only people who had any real rights, at least with respect to power and governance, were wealthy, white men who owned land. That began to change in the early 1800s when local laws began giving other people the right to vote. Although, still only white men. To which there were undoubtedly cries, in public as well as private, of "you have made them equal to us," because of the perception that the power of those entitled to it was being eroded.

Then, in 1870, the 15th Amendment was ratified, making it illegal to deny a citizen—a male citizen—the right to vote based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude. And we know there were public outcries of, "you have made them equal to us," because of the perception that the power of those entitled to it was being further eroded. To the extent that in many places, Blacks were still denied the right to vote through unfair tests and poll taxes.

Then in 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified, giving women the right to vote. To which we know there were public cries of, “you have made them equal to us,” because of the perception that power afforded to those entitled to it was being further diluted.

This is just a simplified illustration based on voting rights. Rights which, even now, are again under threat because of the fears of groups and individuals who feel they are exclusively entitled to govern. Fears of “you have made them equal to us.” You could build similar cases and examples regarding basic human rights. Again, the expansion of rights first from white men to then include men of color to then include white women, to then include women of color, to then include members of the LGBTQ+ community. At each step of the way, at each victory in the battle for equal rights, there having been cries of “you have made them equal to us.” A cry that, again, we continue to hear today, as those who have a sense of their own entitlement seek to strip away rights, precisely because we have had the audacity to make “them” equal to “us.”

In all these cases, our parable for today has a response. When the indignant laborers confront the landowner with charges of “you have made them equal to us,” he effectively responds, “well yes; yes I have made them equal to you.” Of course, that is the whole point of the parable. That when it comes to God’s kingdom and how God operates, all are equal. All receive of God’s abundance—God’s love, God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness—regardless of who they are. Regardless of when they came to the table. Whether they were the Jews of the time who had been considered God’s Chosen People for, at the time of Jesus, going on two thousand years, or whether they were newly converted Gentiles who just found God. Regardless of whether they were lifelong Episcopalians from generations of Episcopalians, or whether they had just walked into a church for the first time in their lives. Regardless of gender or gender identity, regardless of race or ethnicity, regardless of sexual orientation, regardless of socioeconomic status, regardless of political ideology. All are welcome in God’s kingdom. All receive the same benefits in God’s kingdom. All are equal in God’s kingdom.

As one commentator so beautifully notes: “‘the householder’s response makes clear that this vineyard, and by extension, ‘the kingdom of heaven,’ operates with a very different, apparently upside-down logic. Divine blessings are given not according to who works the hardest, but rather according to the free, generous will of the householder. Such blessings, then, are actually not rewards at all — but gifts. The governing ethos of the ‘kingdom of heaven’ isn’t work-and-reward, but rather gift-and-gratitude.”¹

“You have made them equal to us.” In God’s kingdom, this is not an expression of stripped away reward from those who perceive they are entitled to it, but rather, through Christ, is transformed into a gift from a God who loves all of us unconditionally, regardless of who we are.

“You have made them equal to us.” That is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Thanks be to God.

¹ “Us vs. Them: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost,” SALT, September 15, 2026. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/14/us-and-them-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>.