

"GOD: AN E.O.E.?" A SERMON BASED ON MATT. 20:1-16 AND EXODUS 16:2-15 delivered on Sunday September 20, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan.

As we hear Dan read our scriptures, we have to ask ourselves: What's going on here? Our protestant work ethic and sense of equal pay for equal work—our sense of black and white—right and wrong--no compromise fairness—a dollar an hour means "a dollar an hour" not the same pay no matter how many hours have been worked—no matter what the original contract—is totally blown away by this landowner whose apparent disregard for equal pay rights makes us mad. It's not fair, we say. How could Jesus be supporting such a system?

If the landowner in this parable represents God, and the vineyard the kingdom of heaven—then what is this illustration of Jesus saying about God. Is God and Equal Opportunity Employer or not? Well, if we only look at the dollars and cents of it, of course, the answer would have to be, "NO." If you are only looking at God as a "bean counter" someone who only keeps records of our deeds and ledgers of our giving—time, talent, and treasure as a way to decide if we are worthy to enter the kingdom, then the answer is also, "NO." But if that is all that we are looking at, then we have totally missed the point. For what God is—above all else—IS and Equal OPPORTUNITY employer—with an emphasis on Opportunity.

What the illustration of the landowner and the vineyard tells us is that God believes that everyone should have the chance to equally have the OPPORTUNITY to work in the vineyard and to earn a daily wage. Each of his children have the equal opportunity to work toward the kingdom of heaven and that that opportunity cannot be compromised by the fact that some of the workers may be in the wrong place—say waiting in the wrong unemployment line—at the wrong time—or that they might be less desirable characters than the early birds that were hired first. Each person deserves to have daily bread to eat. Each person deserves to have the Opportunity to do that.

This dynamic was brought starkly home to me once when I was using the Ladies Room at the technical school in Granite Falls, Minnesota. I was there for a Teleconference. As I went over to the sink to wash my hands, I was caught-off guard by my own reflection in the mirror over the sink and a sticker at the top of the mirror which asked the following question, "Would you hire this person?" Whoa! I, of course as intended, took an extra look at myself because of that sign. Would I hire me? I thought. Would I hire me as a pastor, with those tired eyes, that look of spiritual fatigue? Indeed, would I hire me for any job if, like so many less fortunate than I, my hair was unkempt, my clothes torn and worn, and my face were smudged with dirt?

Technical schools want to remind students that their appearance does make a difference in their employability in this society, but in reality, does that constitute Equal Opportunity? What if a person has no resources to "put up a good appearance" at a job interview. Will they really have a chance to get hired in our society?

This realization, that God indeed wishes equal opportunity for God's children. That God wishes each child to literally have their daily Bread, but that society continues to use the "bean counting" mode of equality, based on the almighty dollar, came sharply to light during that simple moment of realization before that mirror in the Ladies Room.

Equal Opportunity has taken a hit lately in our society and we are not sure how to fix it. At no other time in our country's history has the gap between rich and poor been so wide and have our ideas of equality of all peoples been so challenged. Do we see and act on our duty to see, like the landowner of the vineyard, that each person has the right to have the opportunity to share in the eating of daily bread? Do we embrace that fact like God did for Moses and that ungrateful, complaining, sniveling mob of Israelites in the wilderness? God's wish is that each one of us is given quail in the evening and manna in the morning—just enough for that day—whether, by societies standards--we deserve it or not. Have we helped around that wilderness campsite in an acceptable way to society or not?

God's answer in the vineyard and in the wilderness is the same: All God's children deserve daily bread, deserve to work in the vineyard, deserve to gather the quail and manna. All God's children deserve Equal Opportunity.

Amen.

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