

Serrmon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2026
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[May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be ever-pleasing in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.]

Good Morning. Today marks the third Sunday of the season of creation and we find in our lectionary texts stories about gathering and harvests.

We also find stories about people who complain. They complain at the beginning of the story, as in the case of those wandering in the wilderness in Exodus, or they complain at the end, as in the case of the laborers at the vineyard in Matthew's gospel.

One easy way to wrest meaning from these texts would be to hear in them an accusation against whining of all kinds—a check on our own grumbling and dissatisfaction and an invitation toward gratitude. You can imagine the sermon that would read in these complaints a lack of faith, or a deficiency of character. On this reading, the message of today's lectionary texts is simple: The word of God comes to tell us to stop whining. You get what you get and you don't get upset. But that is not how God responds to the people who complain in these stories.

For that reason, this morning, I'd like us to look beneath the surface of these complaints where God found stories worth listening to. These stories are sown deep in the soil of the lives and experiences of the people in these texts and so many of us reading them today—their yield is bitter, but sometimes it is all we know.

In the gospel text, Jesus tells a story about a vineyard. There once was a man who owned a vineyard, he says, and the time came to harvest the grapes and so this man went to the market to hire laborers. He hires one group of harvesters at nine, telling them he will pay them at the end of the day what is right. He then goes back to the market and hires another group of laborers at noon, then he returns for another group at three, and still at another at five.

When evening falls, he instructs his manager to pay those who arrived during the final hour of work first and he gives those workers the usual wage for a full day's work. When those who arrived during the earlier hours of the day approach for their wages, they are furious when they find out they have earned the same amount of money as those who arrived when the sun was setting and they begin to complain: “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.”

The landowner reminds these workers that he can do as he wishes, and asks why it is that they resent his generosity. They were promised a day's wages and they received a day's wages—why do they begrudge the wage given to another?

What is harvested here at the end of the workday in this particular field is not just grapes, but a particular set of stories about labor and just deserts that is as old as the exile from Eden. Working to eat takes its toll on us, particularly when the work is not consistent, when we don't know whether or not there will be work tomorrow, whether a famine or bad weather or new tools will reduce the need for our labor, whether there will be enough hours in the field during this season of harvest to put food on the table for the rest of the year.

This hard truth is written in to the parable itself. When the owner of the vineyard goes to the marketplace at 5pm, he asks the last group of laborers why they were standing around idle all day—an implicit criticism of their work ethic. Their reply to him is simple: “because no one has hired us.” Here at this late hour, these workers wait for scraps, for a fraction of a daily wage. The landowner brings them back to his field to work for the last hour, and perhaps in response to what he has learned from their honest reply, he gives them the money they would have earned if someone would have hired them at the start of the day, when they first began to wait in that same scorching sun.

There is something tragic about those who began work in the morning begrudging the payment of their fellow laborers who waited all day in the marketplace, but most of us can recognize ourselves in them, particularly in moments when resources feel scarce, and what others receive feels like a threat or even at times like an injustice. Out of the rocky soil on the other side of Eden, the one we have tilled with sweat all our lives, comes the idea that everything, absolutely everything must be earned and with that, the corresponding fear that it will not be enough. We measure others by the stick with which we measure ourselves, and these harsh calculations reduce us, and separate us from one another. All this striving hardens us, and in the case of the first workers, prevents them from seeing that the kingdom of God is like the end of the work day in this particular vineyard, where everyone receives enough to put food on their table, where no one comes up short.

Our Exodus reading begins with a different complaint. The people who have just been liberated from their slavery in Egypt are hungry), and they are starting to long for the place they left behind.

When I was younger, this complaining sounded childish to me—perhaps because of the way the story was taught in Sunday School. In my mind, the Israelites seemed surly and ungrateful. Here was a people released from four hundred years of slavery and all they could think about was what was for dinner.

I see the story differently now. For generations, these people had lived as slaves in Egypt. The only powers they had known were the cruel slave masters who drove them to back-breaking work, who never let them rest, who murdered their male children to keep their numbers in check. Then Moses came, along with new forms of suffering. Boils, locusts, water turned to blood. We remember the plagues with wonder and awe, as in today's Psalm reading, because of their effects, because of the liberation of the people, but they must have been horrible to live through, and terribly frightening. The Israelites made it through frogs and hail and darkness and then they watched more children die—all the firstborns throughout the kingdom, in every unmarked house. Then this Moses who brought all these new forms of suffering to Egypt, led them from their homes and the only place they had ever known into a desert wilderness where they began to feel the sharp pangs of hunger. “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,” they say, and it is reasonable to imagine them wondering if their looming starvation was yet another plague from the hand of this powerful God.

The complaint of the Israelites bears witness to the cruelties of their experience of labor. When the Israelites raise their voices in protest, their cries emerge from years of violence, abuses of power, horrors ever changing and ever new. When they tell Moses that he has brought them out here to die, it is because they see in him and in God the only kind of power they have known—the kind that takes and takes and takes.

The lectionary tells us that God hears their complaint, but God does not condemn them. To these people who have only known endless labor, God says: “in the twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning, you shall have your fill of bread, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God.” Six days they will gather what they did not sow or hunt, and on the seventh day—the Sabbath day—they won't even have to do that. They will rest then from all their labors and there will still be enough. God hears the stories beneath their complaint, the bitter fruit of so many years of toil, and God gives them a harvest that they never had to plant from a field they never had to plough. This is how they will know who God is, for forty years the Israelites will eat their fill every day and know that God is the one who gives and gives rest.

We mark this year's season of harvest in a time of profound ecological degradation, a time when we are not wrong to worry about hunger. We read these stories of laborers at a time of rising economic inequality and new forms of predation on the poor, and we are not wrong to worry that there may not be enough work for those who need to eat. What will we do then? God looks at the Israelites and finds a way to signal to them that the future can be more than the sum of all the old stories. The harvest we gather might be more than bitter fruit.

We should notice that these stories of Complaint are about bread and wine, and in that way, may be relevant to our experience of the Eucharist. We are invited week by week to taste and see that the Lord is good, but sometimes the Eucharist tastes like the bitterness of our old stories, of the need to earn everything we have, of the sense that, before God or before one another, we are not enough.

The gifts of God are directed also to these stories, to the years of toil and struggle, to the fears of those of us who have lived on the underside of cruel abuses of power, to those who fear the work of our hands will not suffice. Here you can reap what you did not sow, here you can rest and still receive. To those who are exhausted, to those who are afraid of how it all will be measured in the end, hear the words of Matthew's gospel: Take what belongs to you, and go.