Matthew 20: 1-16
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 20, 2026
The Rev. Katherine M. Bush

"Is your eye evil?" This is actually a closer translation of "are you envious?" The landowner brought five waves of laborers to his vineyard to work over the course of a long day. Some worked from dawn to dusk, some for a large stretch of the day, others for several hours, and still a few who worked only in the last rays of sunlight. Then they all got in line to receive their payment from the manager, and there is no wage secrecy here. Everyone knows what everyone else's paycheck looks like. And everyone's paycheck looks exactly the same. They all get an honorable, living wage because that too is a given in this story of the kingdom - note well, those of us who set wages. But still, the grumbling begins.

You may have noticed that there's been a lot of grumbling and complaining this morning. "The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness." There's an undercurrent from Paul as he weighs his desire to be with Christ against the Philippians' need for him to "remain and continue with all of you." And then these hired workers, having received the daily wage, "grumbled against the landowner, saying, '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.'" A lot of whining and complaining, but I can't throw many stones. I'm much the same when hungry or tired of dealing with people or hot. It's a good reminder that when we read these ancient stories, we are reading stories about people who are, well, very people-ish and often very much like us.

But back to your eye, and whether or not it's evil. Really, the landowner wants to know more than what the complaining workers see on the ledger. He knows they see the same number of coins in each hand - which is exactly the fair wage they agreed on. But what do they see when they look up from the money? What do they really see when they look around the world? How do they view the people standing nearby? How do they look at the owner? How do they see themselves? How do they see the sun set on the field at the end of a day's work? "Is your eye evil?" Maybe not the phrasing that you and I would use, but asking how we see the world is a fundamental question.

We've lost a lot of the greats recently: Dolly and Wendell and Gloria, and this past week the writer Annie Dillard died. I'll grant that she's not quite the household name that Dolly Parton was, but she has had an outsized influence on how I see the world. Like few others, Annie Dillard presented an honest and often searing account of the world in all its ferocious grandeur. Her eye was not evil; it was unflinching. And that unflinching, unblinking gaze at the world showed her its glory. Dillard's seminal and award-winning book (though not actually my favorite, ask me later) is Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, and the second chapter of that book is actually a long discourse on the practice of *Seeing.*

Her own eyesight, she acknowledged, and ours, is limited. First the science: we only see "about thirty percent of the light that comes from the sun." Neurons "cut and splice what we do see, editing it for our brains." And then the psychology: we often only see what we expect to

see, and we see better that which we love and know than that which is foreign or displeasing. Then some historical case studies: she vividly describes reading about the experiences of people whose sight was restored when the first cataract operations became available in the last century. Seeing was not a universally welcome experience, especially not in the immediate aftermath. It was discombobulating and frustrating to learn how to see, and you might be surprised to hear how much complaining there was and how reluctant people were to adjust. But eventually, for most, new worlds quite literally appeared before them. In one account, "A twenty-two-year-old girl was dazzled by the world's brightness and kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When at the end of that time she opened her eyes again, she did not recognize any objects, but, 'the more she now directed her gaze upon everything about her, the more it could be seen how an expression of gratification and astonishment overspread her features; she repeatedly exclaimed: 'Oh God! How beautiful!'"

Now, we must be careful here; it's not helpful to turn someone else's disability into a spiritual metaphor. And still, I think, we have another case study before us today about learning how to see. We can follow the frustrating experience of those worrying workers who see the world as competitive and their fellow workers as threats, and then watch as they are invited to move toward a place where maybe the beautiful world contains enough, and where generosity toward others need not lead to grudges and grumbling. They are offered the opportunity to fall in love with the world and the people around them anew.

We don't know how long it took for the workers to learn to see the world around them differently; if they kept their eyes shut for weeks or even forever, it's possible that some of them never adjusted their vision. But I'd like to think they did learn to see things anew. I'd like to think that because I'd like to hold out hope for myself, that I could learn to see the world as a place of camaraderie and not competition, to rid myself of resentment over what others have and to look at my own life and say, "Oh God! How beautiful!" I may be thrown off when I look at the money in my hand and the money in yours, but since it's not pie and because the giver is so generous, I don't have to live by the harsh math of comparison and stinginess. I don't have to live with an evil eye.

Jesus talks about this problem of eyes and how they work elsewhere in Matthew's gospel. In the Sermon on the Mount, he preaches that "The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body [world] will be full of darkness." Because how our eyes work - the very science and psychology of seeing - how we look at the world creates the very world we live in.

We can walk through the wilderness and see the bread all over the place and look at it and say, "What is it?" You and I can make an honest living and resent those around us who don't seem to be putting in the same effort. I can close my eyes to the overwhelming brightness and glory. We can complain and compare our lot with the neighbor's. Or we can try a bite of this fine, flaky substance. We can be glad for work to do and a living wage and advocate for the same for others and also celebrate the good fortune of those achieving equality and equity. You and I can revel in the generosity of a God who gives a whole world and a life we did so little to make, a world that is full of light. We can watch the sun set over the field after a long day and be gratified and astonished and exclaim, "Oh God! How beautiful!"