

September 20, Ordinary 25A (Matthew 20:1–16)

A day's wage for a day's work? There is no such thing in a farm family.

by [JoAnn A. Post](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue

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When I was young, my family farmed both crops and livestock in northern Iowa. Long before farms specialized, as most do now, my family did it all: we husbanded dairy, beef, hogs, and poultry in the barns; we raised corn, soybeans, and alfalfa in the fields. Most of the time our large family—my parents and eight children—could get the work done. But if one of my brothers was sick and unable to milk, or thunderstorms threatened a downed field of hay, or early snowstorms imperiled the harvest, my father had to hire day laborers.

Unlike the vineyard owner in this week's gospel reading, my father didn't look for them at a Home Depot parking lot. He picked up the phone and called the slow-moving school custodian with a bum leg. He called the bank manager's in-and-out-of-trouble son. He called the bachelor farmer who lived alone in a rickety farmhouse. These laborers were of every age, shape, and ability. They were not the strongest workers. But when the dairy cattle needed to be milked or the corn picked in a hurry, none of that mattered.

These laborers were all known to us. They ate at our kitchen table. After the noon meal, they rested for a bit under the oak tree in our front lawn. The laborers left our fields and barns when their own work beckoned, returning again when they were able. It was not an ideal situation. There were probably better options. But my father did not choose these laborers according to their ability. Nor did he pay them the usual daily wage.

My father knew each laborer by name. He knew the sorrows of their lives—the sick child, the shaky marriage, the burdensome mortgage. He knew that these laborers relied on my father and others like him to supplement their income. That's why, when at day's end the hay was in the barn or the cows milked, the laborers gathered again under the big oak tree for a cold beer and a handful of cash.

Had the hired hands worked as hard as they might have? Maybe not.

Could my father have taken advantage of their need? Easily. Would he have been justified in weighting wages based on ability and output? Perhaps.

If my family farm were a parable, one might conclude that in the realm of heaven, all workers are given work. In the realm of heaven, all are valued regardless of their seeming ability or worth. In the realm of heaven, the farmer knows each worker by name, by need. In the realm of heaven, all are compensated for their labor—though certainly not as they might deserve.

But Jesus doesn't tell a parable about a family farm. There is another side to the story he does tell, one with more complicated implications.

Though hired laborers are financially compensated for their labor, the farmer's children are not. My four brothers worked side by side with my father from the time they were old enough to sit on a tractor until they graduated from high school (and summers after that). If you know farmwork, you know that every member of the household farms, not only the adults. That's why, rain or shine, in bitter cold or blistering heat, my brothers

labored outside on the farm—for no wages. My sisters and I worked in the house—meal preparation, cleaning, laundry—for no wages. It was taken as given that by virtue of birth into a farm family, work was compensated by room and board.

Maybe if the terms of the deal had been negotiable, it would have felt different. But more than once one of my brothers regarded himself as an indentured servant at best.

My brothers were not allowed to be part of after- or before-school activities because of daily chores. They didn't have money for themselves as did their peers who worked "regular" jobs. They couldn't spend lazy summer afternoons at the town swimming pool because the hay needed to be baled or the machinery repaired.

As generous as my father was to the hired laborers, so demanding was he of my brothers. A day's wage for a day's work? There is no such thing in a farm family.

If one were to regard this parable as an allegory, my brothers would play the role of the laborers who worked all day in the hot sun. Is it any wonder then that, at day's end, the vineyard owner's all-day laborers are enraged? They have worked hard—all day, in the hot sun. They should have been paid far more than those who worked only a few hours. It is only fair.

Jesus isn't telling a story of an Iowa farm family but of an imagined vineyard owner whose labor practices would, in our time, result in a lawsuit. Remember, this is a parable, and Jesus says this about it: in the realm of heaven, the first will be last and the last will be first. No one is compensated as they desire or deserve. Isn't that the point?