

Wednesday, October 4, 2023 // Written by The Rev. Ben Robertson

My beloved and better half enjoys several varieties of fiber art: sewing, knitting, needlepointing, etc. Because of this obsession hobby, an ort jar sits on the table next to her favorite chair. Orts are the leftover bits of thread and random detritus from a project. According to the internets, the word ort has nothing to do with J. R. R. Tolkien's orcs, but derives from a 15th-century German word meaning scraps.

Sermon writing often creates Orts: questions, factoids, or stories that don't make the final text. I keep a file on my computer of various homiletical Orts in case I could use one in the future.

An ort has stuck with me from a few Sundays ago, 24 September, when we read Jesus' Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). As you may recall, a landowner hires laborers for his vineyard. Some are hired at the very beginning of the day and others at 9, noon, and 3. "And about five o'clock," the Gospel reports, "he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'" These hired at 5 only work for one hour, but all of the workers, regardless of when they were hired, receive the same wage. In my sermon (available on YouTube and Podcast, <https://www.allsaintsrichmond.org/livestream> - shameless, I know), I compared our human concept of fairness with God's blessed abundance.

The ort is a question about that last batch of laborers: what were they doing all day? The landowner asked why they had been idle, but they only said, "no one has hired us." But why? Perhaps they don't look like the typical laborer in a vineyard. Perhaps they want to work but aren't as strong or able as the others. Perhaps they had a sick family member at home and couldn't get to the marketplace. Perhaps they struggle with one of the many things we also struggle with, 2000 years later. I don't know about you, but some days I am one of the first hired, and some days I am one of the last.

But the good news is that all, from the first to the last, are made in the image of God, are blessed by God, and have been given gifts to do good work for God. There is no caste or clique in God's world, just the great and unconditional throng of the beloved. That reality gives me comfort on the days when I mess up, feel inadequate, or dare to be human. Regardless of who we are, we are called by God.