Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his king and said, "My Lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." The king was touched and discerned the man's heart, so as [the gardener] turned to go the king said, "Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all." And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this. And he said, "My! If that is what you get for a carrot—what if you gave the king something better?" So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." But the king discerned his heart and said thank you, and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed.

So the king said, "Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse."

This modern-day parable by Timothy Keller in his book, Prodigal God, illustrates that God has a reward system that is very different from what we are accustomed to in our secular society. While God is always fair and gracious, God extends his grace most bountifully to those who are willing to give even if the reward is uncertain. God rewards those who give to God because they love God and not because they expect a blessing in return.

We notice that in our parable today, the vineyard owner only actually reaches a specific wage agreement with the first group of workers. He goes out early in the morning, finds workers and they agree that if they work in the vineyard for a day – they’ll receive a day’s wage. Seems fair. With the second batch and third batches, he just says he will pay them what seems fair. They have to trust that he knows what is fair, but at least they have some assurance. By the time he gets to the end of the day, he just asks the workers to go and doesn’t discuss wages at all.

When we read the passages preceding this one in Matthew, we find two stories that put in context the passage we read today. The first is the story of the rich young ruler who believes that if he keeps the commandments, he’ll inherit eternal life. The basic carrot and stick approach we’ve all been taught. If I behave well, my parents will reward me; if I misbehave, I will be punished. If I work hard, the boss will reward me more than my less-contributing colleagues. But Jesus sees this young man’s heart and realizes he’s missing a couple of things. He’s missing complete love for his fellow human beings. He also doesn’t love God with all His heart because He isn’t really willing to give up everything for God. Basically, he’s only willing to give what he’s sure will be rewarded and lacks love and faith to do anything more.

The second story that precedes this one is Peter saying to Jesus, “We, your disciples, have left everything to follow you, what reward will we have?” Jesus answers that because they served and gave out of love without expectation of reward, they will sit on thrones with Jesus.

We are called to give and serve because we love God. We don’t ask about the rewards first. We are to be like the last batch of workers to labor in the vineyard that day. When God, the owner of everything on earth, asks us to work in this earth, we go – even if there’s no discussion of a reward for that. When God, the owner of everything, asks us to give, we give – even if there’s no discussion of what we’ll receive in return. We give because we love God and we have faith that God will do what is best. We don’t bargain with God by saying, “God, if I go to church today, will you help me win the game next Saturday?” Or God, if I increase my pledge to the church, will you make sure my investments do well this year?” The lack of bargaining is countercultural and was even counter to what most religions taught in ancient times. Three words were often inscribed on ancient Roman shrines: Do ut des, “I give in order that you may give.” With this declaration the donor made clear that his or her generosity was intended to inspire a like generosity on the part of the god to whom the structure was dedicated.

Our God, the one true God, is different from all those Roman gods – and different from all the secular gods we might make. The one true God calls us to give and serve out of love, not expectation of reward. That one true God isn’t asking us to do anything he wouldn’t do. After all, God lovingly created us and the bountiful world in which we live, knowing we wouldn’t love him perfectly nor perfectly care for his world. God loved us so much that He sent His son to show His love to us by dying so that we might have life. God did that even though God knew not all of humanity would respond to this gift in love.

Martin Luther said. “Our office is a ministry of grace and salvation. It subjects us to great burdens and labors, dangers and temptations, with little reward or gratitude from the world. But Christ himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully.”

We minister – serve and give – because we love, not because we expect that our giving will make our own lives on earth easier. And the God who first loved us, will love us still and will keep us close to him eternally.

Amen