

IT'S NOT FAIR!

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Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the vineyard workers gives more people problems than just about any other parable that Matthew presents. Matthew does challenge us with some of Jesus' most confusing and challenging parables for almost all of these parables end with some sort of twist in them that turns the world, as we know it upside down. This one in particular seems so unfair.

First of all the purpose of a parable is to make us squirm, to make us want to figure out what this is all about. In Godly Play parables are placed in gold boxes. They have to be unpacked for us to play with them, to wonder about them in order to make meaning out of them.

Megan McKenna calls parables the arrows of God. They pierce us and call us up short. These parables especially ones in Matthew are about the great reversal in the kingdom. They are uncomfortable at first, second and even third reading. For following Christ is doing just the opposite of what we normally do. We worry about being upwardly mobile and in reality many worry today about just keeping up. We panic when something like the economic developments of the past several years get in the way of the upward mobility in our world. These parables deal with a different type of economy, God's economy. God's economy is the wrestle in today's collect about worrying about heavenly and not earthly things.

We need to put on the perspective of the kingdom of God for an analysis of today's passage. Today's gospel has nothing to do with the human world we live in. This is a theological statement about God and ultimately about God's grace. God's economy is one of grace and love not work and reward.

God's economy does not work according to our rules, (Thank God). I'm not really sure that I want to always get what I have earned or deserve. There are days when that would be really great, but there are those other days, when, well let's just say I'm glad God's economy is run by rules of the Kingdom and not our earthly rules.

This brings to mind the Second Song of Isaiah. I have used this example before and eventually you will probably have this memorized. In fact I hope you will, for this canticle is very important.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, *
nor your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, *

so are my ways higher than your ways,
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Some complain that this parable is unfair and I say thank God it is. I am grateful because I view myself as one of those folks hired around 3:00 in the afternoon. I'm working hard now, but I surely have not been on the job since sunrise. This is an interpretation shared by of John Chrysostom one of the early church fathers. One message of this parable is that it is never too late to turn to Christ.

What appears to be the unfair piece is that the early morning workers feel cheated. They have done more, so they feel they deserve more. However that misses the point of the metaphor of the denarius, the day's pay. If the metaphors here are God as the landowner, Israel as the vineyard and we are the workers then what does the denarius stand for. The denarius or a standard days wage can serve as a metaphor for salvation. Now we are saved by the Grace of God, not by our own efforts. You either are saved or you are not. It is sort of like being pregnant; there is no such thing as being a little bit pregnant. So too there is no such thing as being a little saved.

This is not only a parable about the kingdom but it is a parable about Grace. Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills¹. So the wages of the vineyard workers are a gift in this case not a wage.

One thing that those early vineyard workers do not understand because they are so wrapped up in their work is that they do not understand what the workers who come late to the fields have missed.

I call myself one of the 3 o'clock workers because I spent a lot of time wandering around not working in the vineyard. I stopped attending the church I grew up in sometime in middle school. I played my trumpet at an Episcopal Church in high school and thought that was pretty neat, but never responded to the calling I felt to join that church. Church was somewhere you worked to make some side money as a college student. Wendy and I were married in an American Baptist church and later I sat in the sanctuary of another American Baptist church. I was a good example of the saying sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian anymore than sitting in your garage makes you a car. There was no relationship with God; in fact there was a long period of great doubt and struggle. There was also a long period of a deep emptiness that I could not name, but knew was there. I had a hole that I tried to fill with hard work, success, awards, everything except the one thing, the one being who could actually fill that hole, God.

It was not until 1992 that I found the Episcopal Church and was baptized at age 37 that I became a vineyard worker. My own experience and that of all the people I have worked with that are late afternoon vineyard workers is that we all grieve what we have missed by being late to the field. Over half of my life was spent with

God kept at a nice safe distance. Over half of my working career was spent doing a job I was very good at, but ultimately didn't satisfy the needs of my soul. There was a hole in my life that only God could fill. I wonder what if I had heeded that call in high school to join St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Lakewood. What if I had heeded that call to consider being a priest that I heard as a young boy sitting in church on scout Sunday and ignored? What if I was celebrating 30+ years of ordained ministry come this December instead of just seven?

This distance from God is the painful price of the late worker. The reward of the long time vineyard worker is that they have not had to live feeling estranged from God. They have never known a time without God.

If as several recent theologians including Rob Bell have written that hell is life without God or at a distance from God, then all who distance themselves from God have been there. There was an article in the New York Times this week about what the author labeled the new atheism of Stephen Hawkins and others. The great issue that they face is how to make meaning in life without some sort of religious construct. Well if life without meaning is the price of atheism, then that certainly sounds like hell to me! This is a truly terrible price and the saddest part is that people are not even aware of this pain until they come to the vineyard and join in the work.

One of the great challenges in our world today is that people are busy trying to fill the God hole in their life with everything but God. They are focused on the wages of the real world, rather than the wages of the vineyard. The wages of the vineyard are truly the ones that are important. The wages of the vineyard are what our collect for the day addresses:

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.

The wages of the vineyard are what endure. The wages of the vineyard are what give our life meaning. Best of all the wages of the vineyard are there for all of us no matter when we show up for work and the benefits start right away.

For God is so big that nobody is outside of the love of God. God is so big that God is waiting for us to come to him, just so God can show us how much God loves us. WE see this love in both this parable and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I thank God that God's economy is a heavenly one, and not an earthly one. Thank God it's not fair.

¹ Definition if from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer.