

14 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 20 – Year A – September 18, 2011
Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16
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Remember high school? Sure you do! Remember that excruciating moment in phys. ed. class when the teacher picked the two best athletes and then invites them to select teams? Maybe one or two of us were the chosen team leaders, but for the rest of us, the horror was just beginning. “Please don’t pick me last, please don’t pick me last,” is our urgent prayer. Forget friendship, popularity, or intellectual prowess. The selection process was purely primal: get the best first, because winning is everything. It makes me wonder if Charles Darwin was one of the first or the last to be selected when he was at school. When the stakes are reduced to filling up the rest of the roster with warm bodies, then friends are called, leaving the last and the lonely to bear the weight of humiliation. They are essentially the uninvited. Yet even in that moment there’s the hope of redemption. Who knows which team will win, and reap the instant rewards of victory? Amazingly, shockingly, the first can suddenly be last, and the last first. Even as cultural norms steamroll over our deeper sensitivities of what is truly fair and unfair, God’s kingdom can and does still break through, like a rainbow on a stormy day, filling our soggy gray world with color, and delight.

Once again, Jesus provides us with significant food-for-thought in today’s parable from Matthew’s Gospel. Just like the first hearers of the parable, and those first laborers selected, you and I are outraged that those who have worked a twelve-hour day in the scorching heat are paid exactly the same as those who go into the vineyard one hour before sunset. What’s wrong with this landowner? Can’t he see how unfair he’s being? He doesn’t even pay off the workers privately, so that no one knows what the other is being paid. He deliberately rubs salt into their raw hands by making the first receive their daily bread last. The scale of justice here is seriously unbalanced, and so, we assume, is the mind of the landowner. This isn’t how the world should work.

Jesus provides an example that we can relate to, but He’s definitely not talking about the way the world works. As the first line tells us, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” Like what exactly? Is the kingdom really a place where those who work the hardest are treated *exactly* the same as those who idle away most of their days? What kind of message is that to Christ’s faithful disciples, who give and give of ourselves? Is it the same as saying, love God, accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then go ahead and do whatever you want? That’s St. Augustine’s enigmatic line. Philip Yancey is more pragmatic, “From nursery school onward we are taught how to succeed in the world of ungrace. The early bird gets the worm. No pain, no gain. ... Demand your rights. Get what you pay for. I know these rules well because I live by them... I work for what I earn; I like to win; ... I want people to get what they deserve – nothing more, nothing less.” This is a world of “ungrace”. The principle we all carry with us is that hard work should be compensated fairly. The principle Jesus demands is to give joyfully and cheerfully of ourselves, and let God be the judge. Maybe Jesus is teaching us about God’s grace and generosity, in a way that shocks us to the core, in order to help us grow and change. This parable certainly does that. It cannot be dismissed lightly, or without serious thought.

The story is meant to dwell with us, drill into our hardened hearts, and take root. It’s supposed to sweep us into the vineyard of our own lives, to hold up a mirror that reveals just how often we try to negotiate with God for rewards and favors. The parable reflects us proudly displaying our list of check marked rules that we cling to in order to feel superior. What if Jesus is deliberately provoking us to examine our own competitiveness, or what *really* motivates us? How many of us work for love, money, recognition, or some other reward? Is our answer the same when it comes to sharing our spiritual gifts? Do we give back to God grudgingly and sparingly? Do we give dutifully, because we think that in all fairness everyone should pay their dues? Or, do we give generously in love; out of humble gratitude, for all that God has done for us? How many of us hold on to a special reserve of well-aged resentment for all those who, like the thief on the cross, seem to live lawless lives only to ask for and receive God’s forgiveness in

the nick of time?

As Yancey continues, “If I care to listen, I hear a loud whisper from the gospel that I did not get what I deserved. I deserved punishment and got forgiveness. I deserved wrath and got love... I deserved ... crawl-on-your-knees repentance; I got a banquet ... spread for me.” Praise God, this story is not about getting what we deserve. Nor is it about the kind of unnatural selection defined by the world’s carefully devised systems of rank and strata. We can only understand God’s point of view when we set aside our natural desire to judge others as superior, inferior, as a winner or a loser, as better, or worse. After all, that’s a fool’s game, because we are using human standards, and it has nothing to do with divine justice *or* God’s gracious hospitality. There’s an old joke about the guy who asks his friend, “How’s your wife?” to which the other man retorts, “Compared to what?” Praise God, this story is not about blind, impartial justice, as the world would have it. God’s justice is inextricably bound to God’s love and mercy, and to all the fullness of God. And God, as St. Anselm says is beyond anything that we can possibly conceive or imagine. God is wholly other, as we hear in the prophetic voice of Isaiah (55:8-9), “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are 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.”

Perhaps we struggle to understand the fullness of God’s grace because we really haven’t grasped the magnitude of God’s gifts. Perhaps, we’re still working hard by the world’s standard operating procedures. Maybe we just can’t believe that God loves us unless we **do** something to earn that love. In the story, the first workers complain about how the others are *made* equal to them. That attitude comes from trying to earn God’s free and gracious gift of salvation through our own efforts. In the story, they’re the ones who hear the landowner saying, “Take what belongs to you and go.” Outside of God’s grace, they go home tired, resentful, and joyless, completely missing the point. The others have accepted their work on faith. At the end of the day, they rejoice in God’s generosity. They’ve welcomed the invitation to be co-creators in God’s vineyard. The point is that we are blessed to be invited, and to have the opportunity to join in God’s mission of love and reconciliation. On reflection, St. Augustine was a wise man. For those who truly love God desire nothing more than to please God. It is pure joy to discover the breadth and depth of God’s immeasurable gifts in our ministries of love. It is our gift of love in relationship with Christ Jesus to give our whole self – body, mind, and spirit – to His service. We don’t need to compete with others, or do endless comparisons. We are equal and equally beloved in God’s sight. We set aside judgmentalism in favor of trust and faith. Our mission is to be faithful servants, faithful stewards of all God’s good gifts. In love, we share our faith with others, and give with gratitude. By God’s grace, we put our faith into action by caring for the least and last, as if they were the first in line.

Our sense of identity motivates and directs our attitudes and behaviors. Are we ready for God’s radical equality, generosity and grace? In the theory of the looking glass self it is proposed that we tend to become what the most important person in our life thinks we are. It begs the question, who is the most important person in our life? Who shaped our image in the mirror of our lives? Our spouse, partner or best friend? A parent, a hero, or Jesus? God has a gift for everyone this morning. The bags are marked according to gender. Take a slip from the appropriate bag, but don’t open it yet. Now, please open your paper, and read with me. “You are my son/daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Signed God. Please take that slip of paper home, tape it to your mirror, and read it every day. God’s generosity and grace is part of our freedom in Christ. Imagine how your life, our lives, could be different if we believe the astounding words of God’s grace, made real for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh?

Amen.