

The Wages of Grace

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

September 21, 2014

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?
Is thine eye evil, because I am good? Matt 20:15 (KJV)

On this crisp, early fall morning our gospel reading takes us to the very last days before Jesus journeys to Jerusalem for the last time. It reminds us that in our church-based calendar the new year begins with the first day of Advent which is closer than you think! I haven't yet heard a countdown for shopping days 'til Christmas but trust me, it's coming soon!

This morning we consider another of the parables unique to the Gospel of Matthew – the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. In these last days of his ministry, Jesus is remarkably active spreading the good news through his teaching and healing. As usual this parable can be approached from many vantage points. But for those of us who have had to struggle from time to time to make ends meet, this parable can be quite unsettling. In a society where self-promotion often seems to be more highly valued than diligence and loyalty, those of us who put our heads down and grind it out day after day, probably find it offensive. In a merit-based, capitalist society how are we to understand equal pay for unequal work?

Do we all have a mental image of what is going on as the landowner looks for workers to harvest his grapes? We don't have a lot of agriculture here in Westchester, but you can see the same scene playing out in the parking lot of a Home Depot, or near large nurseries or other public squares; a place where men in work clothes seem to be loitering. Have you seen them? Can you recall the controversy a decade or so ago in Port Chester and Mamaroneck about whether these mostly immigrant men should even be allowed to

congregate? There were incidences of heckling and vigilantism. Houses were raided to find undocumented persons or too many persons living in a single dwelling? Do you remember? There were even one or two deaths the outcome of which I don't recall. I hope we have become more sensitized to the plight of hardworking immigrants and especially migrant workers and the challenge of finding work in a weak economy.

The migrant worker, and before them of course the slave, has been a vital part of agriculture throughout history and in this country for well over a century. They weren't always from Mexico or Central America but they were nearly always treated the same. They were often hired into challenging work environments under intense

It says that our envy, our jealousy, our covetousness casts an evil shadow over all that we see. It blinds us to God's gracious generosity. It succinctly states the sad truth that we would rather see ourselves as victims and wallow in self-pity and anger than open our eyes to God's grace.

pressure to harvest at machine like rates. At the end of the day, it was not uncommon to be grossly underpaid or not paid at all. The unscrupulous boss counted on the likelihood that the worker might be undocumented and in any event lacked the resources to pose a serious challenge. That is why it was important to maintain a sense of fear – to keep workers off balance – so they couldn't organize or rebel. I am happy to report that the situation in Westchester has improved significantly. Organizations like the Don Bosco centers have helped organize and protect workers to ensure they

are paid “whatever is right”. These centers also provide other services such as ESL and assistance with documentation. But comprehensive immigration reform continues to be kicked down the road. Maybe after the next election...

So it seems the plight of the underclass has not changed all that much over the millennia. It is also interesting to note that commentators from higher up the food chain haven't changed much either. I came across a respected Bible commentary from a century or two ago that assumed those who were still available for work late in the day were either lazy or simply not interested in working – they were malingerers. We can probably agree that not all workers work the same. Some may be more skilled, younger and more energetic, or simply stronger. But we all want and need to work to fulfill our sense of purpose and to maintain our human dignity. We must all work in order to survive and feed our families. The Home Depot parking lot, this is the scene in my mind's eye as I imagine the landowner out in the pre-dawn morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. He takes his fill and the harvest begins. Somewhat curiously, the landowner goes back several times to hire additional laborers. Was it an especially bountiful harvest? Had he originally planned two days for the harvest but saw worrisome signs that the next day's weather might ruin the harvest? These are details that Jesus apparently didn't think important.

Let me quickly bring into focus three or four points that are important in our understanding of Jesus' words. Notice that the laborers first hired in the early morning agreed to the “usual daily wage”. There was an oral contract of sorts. That “contract” was fulfilled. At four other times during the day he went back to the public square and hired additional workers, the final group just an hour before quitting time. With the second group the landowner promised to pay “whatever is right” and they too seemed to accept the arrangement as they went into the field to work. And so it was for all but the last group to whom he simply said “you also go

into the Vineyard.” There was no discussion regarding compensation. For whatever reason, these “malingerers” chose to work with little promise of compensation.

“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’” The last shall be first – do you hear the echo? And of course it is precisely this arrangement that causes the kerfuffle. If the landowner had decided to pay the workers in the order they were hired, it is possible that his generosity toward those who worked fewer hours would not have been known. It is possible everyone would have gone home having done honest work and feeling properly – or generously – compensated. I can sense your skepticism. People being what they are, word would certainly have leaked. I wonder how many of us have worked in a corporate environment where we are told that what one was paid was to be kept private? It was a matter that should not be shared. In the banking business this was especially important at bonus time. Once the check had cleared, there was inevitably turnover at all levels as fellow employees interpreted the meaning of the check. These “secret” bonus payments might as well have been posted on the internet!

And it was exactly this type of secrecy policy that was used to further harden the glass ceiling for women. Competent women executives, never truly part of the inner circle, received their annual salary increases and an always appreciated bonus but had no way of discovering how they were being treated versus their male peers. It was virtually impossible for them to know whether they were being discriminated against. It was this type of secrecy around compensation, so widespread throughout corporate America, which led to the Lilly Ledbetter Act that helped chip away at the glass ceiling for women. It extended the window for allowing legal action to seek redress. And as we will discover, it is precisely this view from the “back of the line”; this

view of how God operates in the world that will give us the deepest insight into the meaning of Jesus' words.

If we try to understand this parable as an example of God's grace or outrageous generosity as compared to merit based fairness, does our emotional response change at all? Or are we still envious of those who seem to be more highly favored by God? Do we lapse into childhood memories and complain that our older or younger sibling seemed to get preferred treatment? Is there a sense that no matter how generously life deals with me as an individual I am never satisfied if I suspect that my neighbor has been treated more generously? Is there something about our current understanding of democracy, capitalism, meritocracy, the rugged individual that promotes this competitiveness; this sense that we can never have enough? Or is it simply human nature that we refuse to be satisfied? Is it this exact character trait that Paul is trying to re-program into inexhaustible desire to live in Christ? As he said in his letter to the Philippians that Robert just read so well, "living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer." (v. 21-22) What if rather than worrying about whether my neighbor or my co-worker has received a higher wage, my concern is whether I have better served my Lord and Creator?

Patrick J. Willson (*Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Vol. 2*, WJK Press, p. 125) uses Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* to illustrate this point. Shaffer's play was based on a play by Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, and made into an Academy Award winning movie starring F. Murray Abraham and Tom Hulse. The antagonist is Antonio Salieri, one of the most celebrated musicians of his day, who, as the story is told, made a pact with God. Salieri promised God that he would remain celibate and write glorious music in God's honor if God would bless Salieri with fame and fortune. As Salieri reveals from his wheelchair in the lunatic asylum both sides of the bargain were met. Salieri

dominated Italian language Opera in Vienna but when the child prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart arrives in town the childish, tactless, vulgar "Wolfie" causes quite a stir. Mozart was a prodigy of the highest order. As Salieri is quoted in the movie it is as though he takes dictation from God. Salieri was paid the wages agreed to in his so-called bargain with God but is nevertheless desperately envious of Mozart's prodigious talent.

Irenæus, one of the early church fathers had a rather Christocentric take on the parable. He proposed that the men who worked longer hours represented the patriarchs and prophets of Hebrew Scripture. So who were the last workers hired? They represented the disciples of Christ! I'm not especially drawn to that interpretation but it did lead me to a parallel thought process. As you know I am fond of 'journey' as a metaphor for life in its broadest terms and more particularly our spiritual development. I understand faith to be a lifelong process and not one that is frozen at a single moment in time. Some will develop a right relationship with God early in life and delight in God's peace for a lifetime. For others it may be a late start or long periods of doubt and distraction. But at the end of the day or rather the end of days! there is hope that those who arrive late will come to know their Creator in the same manner as those who enjoyed a lifetime of righteousness. This understanding encourages us to stay the course; to continue the journey no matter how far we may have strayed from the path.

Our reading comes to a close with the landowner responding to all the hubbub saying: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (v. 15) That's the New Revised Standard Version. Listen to the translation in the Authorized or King James Version: Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" There is something profound in that translation. It says that our envy, our jealousy, our covetousness casts an evil shadow over all that we see. It blinds us to God's gracious generosity. It succinctly states the sad truth that we would rather

see ourselves as victims and wallow in self-pity and anger than open our eyes to God's grace. Because we place ourselves at the center of the universe our understanding of the world becomes dangerously narrow and self-serving. We become so wrapped up in our own emotional needs that we are unable to step back – to the back of the line – to glimpse the world as our Creator sees it; to see the generosity of our Lord who in his wisdom pays the last, first. We become unable to rejoice in the generosity of God's goodness if it is given to anyone but ourselves.

Aren't we all a bit like that? How do we clear our vision – rid ourselves of that evil eye? We can begin by recognizing that contentment is not necessarily an evil word! It is not necessarily a sign of laziness. We must decide how we will use the gifts *we have been given*. Being able to do what we have been gifted to do is a blessing that goes well beyond salary. Some of us are better at business than others. Making money is not in and of itself evil. It is how we value money and relatedly, how we use it. We have a choice to make. As the apostle Paul put it to the Philippians: God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – (v. 29)

Jesus makes it fairly clear that we cannot know the order of things in this life or any other! It is unlikely we can game the system! Perhaps the answer is simply to pick up our cross and exercise our privilege.

Amen