

The Church of the Holy Cross
September 18, 2011
The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard
Matthew 20:1-16
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The Problem with Fairness

Parable: the kingdom of God is like...like what?

At first something we recognize: a tiny seed, a shepherd who loses a sheep, a little yeast in some flour...today the kingdom of God is like a contractor looking for some workers for the day.

We are with the story so far: the contractor agrees on a daily wage with each group of workers—the 6 am group, 9 am group, 12 noon group, the 3 pm group, and the 5 pm group. At the end of the day he lines them up and pays them the agreed upon wage, beginning with the 5 pm group. You can imagine the 3 pm, noon, and 9 am groups getting increasingly agitated as they discover they all have the same wage. They may have shaken their heads, but they knew they were getting a good enough deal since none had worked a full day.

But the 6 am group who had toiled the whole day with hard manual labor, giving their all, they were holding out for more. Compared with the other workers they had obviously worked longer and harder, and deserved more than the others. This is what they expected.

This is what the kingdom of God should be like: a gradation of pay compensating those who work more with more, and those who work less with less. This allows for economic incentive, mobility, and fairness...right? We expect this of our economy, and we expect this of God's economy.

The words of the old prophet Isaiah come to mind: "For God's ways are not our ways, and our ways are not God's ways."

The parable takes a turn and suddenly is not so recognizable anymore. We are not in Kansas anymore.

Truth is the contractor agreed on a wage with the earliest/6am group, and he is paying them the agreed upon wage as promised: that is fair. What comes to light is not the contractor's fairness but the early group's envy. The contractor rightly asks, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" Another translation reads, "Or do you begrudge my generosity?"

At issue here is the same-ness factor: the other groups received the same as the early group; the early group received the same wage as the other groups. It is this same-ness, this equality with others that so upsets them. Do they begrudge the contractor his generosity—darn right they do! One preacher has said that even as a redeemed people, we are all born legalists to whom grace remains an unnatural and often surprising intrusion.

The kingdom of God is like an intrusion of grace on our carefully defined system of labor and reward. It is like other people getting the same grace, the same acceptance, the same reward as you. It is like a prodigal son who wastes his life away and then in a last ditch attempt to survive returns home and gets the same reward as the good son, the responsible one: the same embrace, the same acceptance, the same reward. It is like a Communion table set for everyone who will come, saint and sinner alike. Can you believe it? The same bread is given, the same wine offered for the half-hearted, the tired, the bored, the lazy, the skeptic, the procrastinator, the shirker. The same body given, the same blood poured out for you. The kingdom of God is like that.

Turns out God doesn't care when you get in line. That's bad news for us who do care. Good news is that first or last, God calls us in by name: Come in, come in, come in. Welcome home.