

Sunday September 21, 2014

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard is another parable that is only found in Matthew's gospel. This parable with its different laborers, differing hours of work and yet the same pay may seem strange to us, who are used to being paid for work that is completed. Yet in Jesus time this parable could have a number of meanings related to who is given standing. In Matthew's time there were issues around the inclusion of the gentiles in the new Jewish Christian movement. This parable can be seen as a commentary on this as each who comes, no matter how late, is treated the same. This could therefore also be seen as commentary to the disciples themselves, as shortly after this parable the sons of Zebedee ask to be first among all the disciples. This parable states that all who come are treated equal by God no matter when they come.

Matthew 20: 1-16

¹God's kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work.

³Later, about nine o'clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. ⁴He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. ⁵They went.

"He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. ⁶At five o'clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, 'Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?'

⁷They said, 'Because no one hired us.'

"He told them to go to work in his vineyard.

⁸When the day's work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, 'Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.'

⁹Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given a dollar. ¹⁰When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. ¹¹Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, ¹²'These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.'

¹³He replied to the one speaking for the rest, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? ¹⁴So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. ¹⁵Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?'

¹⁶Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – “If I am first, who is last?”

Two weeks ago the meditation was around God’s infinite love for us and last week we talked about the forgiveness of God, which knows no bounds. It is much like the air, always there for us, but we must pass it on. Today we talk about another of God’s gifts to us, a gift that I struggle to understand.

I remember as a young person when I went to school dances you could always be assured that if there was a music person the final song of the night would be Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” The lyrics of beginning of the song are as follows
“There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven.
When she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for.
Ooh, ooh, and she's buying a stairway to heaven.”

I was thinking about this song in relation to the scripture and meditation today and how they seem to go together. In the song this woman is basing her life on the material aspects of the world and not on what might really matter and she believes that she is buying the stairway to heaven!

I find this scripture interesting because of where it falls in Matthews Gospel. This particular passage comes right after the interaction that Jesus has with the wealthy young man. The man who Jesus tells to go and sell everything that he has and only in that way can he enter the kingdom of heaven. Then right after this interaction at the end of chapter 19, Peter speaks up and says the following to Jesus, “Look, we have left everything and followed you; so what will we get out of it?” After Jesus replies to this question we have this morning’s parable. So this then begs the question, were the disciples like that woman in the song? Where they trying to buy their way into heaven with good deeds? And if so, what is the response that we need to understand? Are the disciples buying their own stairway to heaven? Are we?

The parable this morning can be, from our point of view, be a difficult one to understand. In this parable, the estate manager goes out in the morning to find workers for the vineyard. Now in the first century those who did not have steady employment would be at the town square, or local gathering place in the hopes that one who needed some extra laborers would come by and give them work for the day. In this parable this is exactly what the estate manager did. But the estate manager did not just go out once, they went back again and again and each time they sent more workers into the vineyard. At the end of the day, the estate manager called those who worked the fields together and paid them for the day’s work. This is where this parable can get tricky because they all were paid the same amount regardless of when they began to work in the field. Those who went into the field early complained and were angry as they judged that those who went into the field later were not worthy of what

they had received. How many times in life have we judged others as not being worthy of what we deserve? When we put ourselves first, who then becomes last?

This past summer has seen some really difficult times as people have been judged to worth less than others. In August 18 year old Michael Brown was shot and killed by police, in Ferguson Missouri, even though he was unarmed. I read an article on Bustle.com written by Lulu Chang that related an FBI study in the states that reported that police agencies used deadly force against Afro-Americans almost 2 times per week. Are they judged as being less than whites?

We all heard last month of the tragic death of Tina Fontaine here in Winnipeg which has renewed calls for an inquiry into the almost 1200 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada, yet the calls go unheeded. Is this group of people judged as being worth less?

We can easily fall into viewing this parable in regards to how business works and in looking at this story in that way we might be missing the point. What if the point is not about fair wages but rather about how we so many times in life put self-interest above others? How we judge others as less deserving then we are and that is what informs how we act towards them. What if the parable was about God's gifts and unending grace that is showered upon us, regardless of when we come to accept those gifts, because those gifts are always there? The parable this morning highlights that we are not to judge others, we are to be one with others. I heard it said that what we need to understand is that those who seem to be last, are the ones we need to bring to the fore. Jesus states in Matthew 25 that whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done to me. We are called to not judge, but rather to raise up those whom it would be so easy to judge. We are challenged to take that grace that God so freely rains upon us and to pass that grace onto others. We are challenged to not judge others, but to recognize that we are all worthy in God.

This morning we had two baptisms, Katrina who is nine and Michael who is only 6 months old. At the end of their lives, is Michael looked on with more favor because he was baptized into the body of Christ nine years earlier than Katrina? Would we judge them in this way? Would we say that one is more deserving than another? Or is God's grace given to both equally?

I would like to end with a quote from Mother Teresa, who said, "If you judge people, you have no time to love them." We are called to pass along God's grace without counting our own good deeds as a tally sheet for how good we are.

God's grace is always there for us, we cannot measure our deeds to buy that stairway to heaven. God accepts us as we are, in our faults in our weakness, but God calls us to something more. God calls us to a place of non-judgment, a place where the love and

grace of God is spread for all we meet. Can we do this? As our commitments at baptism go, "We can, God being our helper." **AMEN**