

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

If you've ever spent any time around small children, you already know that even very young ones have a highly developed sense of fairness. The developmental psychologists tell us that by the age of 12 months, most children have already discovered this sense of fairness. It seems to be inborn...even instinctive. They want things to be fair for themselves and they also want things to be fair for others. They will rush to the defense of another child who is being shortchanged in some way. And they will protest loudly if they are being shortchanged. They seem to be incredibly generous in tipping the scales towards justice. It seems that it takes a while for the children to adapt to the Protestant work ethic, to the temptations of cheating and to the ever-present motivation to be 'the best' at whatever they do. And the assumption that the harder we work, the more virtuous and deserving we are.

If we look at life as a zero sum game, we can understand some of our own emotional reactions to fair play and rewards based on merit. We learn early that working hard pays off. We learn early that doing a good job means we deserve fair compensation or perhaps even a raise. We put great stock in a 'job well-done' and we expect ourselves and others around us to perform to the best of our ability at all times. We have the sense that we deserve what we earn. We deserve it because we worked hard. Or we deserve it because we worked long hours. We were in the office more often than anyone else and we deserve to be compensated accordingly. That's fair, right? We don't like people who cut corners. We don't like people who cheat. We don't like people who seem to earn more than we think they are worth. It's all about merit, right?

Maybe not. The parable we just heard about the laborers in the field flies in the face of all the values we hold dear about hard work and fair compensation. But what if this parable is not about hard work...or even talent...or even dedication? What if this parable is not about 'fairness' as we define it? What if this parable is about something that we rarely consider...God's nature and God's love for creation and God's love for individual human beings? What if God's rules are different from the ones created by human beings? What if God's sense of justice and fair play has nothing whatsoever to do with merit? That notion rather stands things on their heads, doesn't it?

We might do well to think back to the reaction of the older son in the parable about the Prodigal Son. His nose is quite definitely out of joint. He's angry and he sulks because he has done everything 'right' and his younger brother has broken every rule in the book, but when the younger brother returns, the father lavishly showers him with gifts and with love. It's not fair. We all know it's not fair. We all understand why the older brother is upset. He's done everything he was supposed to do and, yet, his father never made a fuss over him. His younger brother doesn't deserve all the love and adoration that the father is pouring out on him. He doesn't deserve it at all. As a matter of fact, for all the wretched things he has done, the younger brother deserves to be shut out in the cold...to be punished...to be castigated...to be judged. Right? Well, if we are talking about the human concept of justice, we might say so. The little so-and-so deserves whatever punishment he gets. Right? But that's not what happens.

Jesus knows that we already know about the human concept of justice. Jesus is trying to teach us about God's sense of justice! Jesus is trying to teach us about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. And it's very different from the Kingdom of Earth. It's hard for us to conceive of a justice system that does not reward according to merit, but rewards according to existence. God loves you because you exist...not because you are bright or because you are beautiful, but because you are God's creation...God's beloved child...and God loves you whether you want God to love you or not.

All the parables are designed to give us some insight into the nature of God and this place that Jesus describes as the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. The parables won't explain the Kingdom of God completely, but we learn that the rules there are not the same as the rules on earth. Think about the parables most familiar to you. They begin with...

"The kingdom of God is like....."

.....and we hear about the parable about the wheat and the weeds growing up together and Jesus tells us to leave them both be...not to try to destroy the weeds lest we damage the wheat as well. No judgment.

And the kingdom of God is like...treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes out and sells all that he has and buys that field. The kingdom of God apparently is more precious than anything we could possibly own in this world.

And the kingdom of God is like...the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine of his one hundred sheep and goes in search of the one who is lost. Being found by God when we are lost seems to be important to God.

And the parable we heard last week; the kingdom of God is compared to the rich king who settled accounts with his slave and forgave him all that he owed...an insurmountable amount...more than he could ever have repaid....just like us. And we are expected to do likewise with people who owe us.

But none of the parables completely capture the nature of the kingdom of God because they fly in the face of the way humans have organized the world...not the way God has. But we can begin to contemplate the nature of the kingdom of God, by listening carefully to these parables. They do give us some insight. Apparently, God values and rejoices in finding that which is lost.

This week, we hear a parable that offends our sense of fair play. It assaults our Protestant work ethic. It flies in the face of all that we know about how things work and how we should behave and what we should expect from the world and from each other. Our initial reaction is to protest that.

“This is not fair!” Quite frankly, this parable offends us...because it is not fair. But our reaction to this parable is not of God. Our reaction to this parable is completely human. This parable stirs up our sense of injustice, not our sense of justice. It stirs up our jealousy, not our sense of inclusion. It stirs up our sense of division, not our sense of unity. That’s not God’s doing. That’s ours. We own our own emotions and reactions.

Stop and think for a minute about what we know about what Jesus has taught us through all four of the gospels. In Luke, for example, we learn about God’s mission of reversal...of upending the social stratas that have been created by human beings. In the Magnificat that Mary sings when she learns about the child she will bear, she speaks about the strength of God: “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

More to the point: the parable we heard this morning is about a landowner who sweeps up idle (and therefore lost) people and gives them a purpose. Indeed, given that this is a parable about Jesus' kingdom, what we're talking about here is the purpose we've been looking for, or avoiding, all along: God's purpose for us. God’s call to us. This parable is really not at all about "reimbursement" or "fair wages"--the principles we normally associate with hired labor. It is rather about a gracious and undeserving gift. It is about what Jesus brings to the world and how he transforms it. After all, who is Jesus, and what is his ministry, if not a gracious transformation, a divine reclamation, of the world?

The scandal of this parable is that we are all equal recipients of God's gifts. The scandal of our faith is that we are often covetous and jealous when God's gifts of forgiveness and life are given to others in equal measure. This parable shines a spotlight on the indignities and injustice of the world in which we live...and the one the Jews lived in; disposable bodies; no dignity; no power. And to see that in our own world, we need go no farther than the local Seven-Eleven three blocks from our church. The day laborers are there...praying that they will get hired...praying that they will be able to feed their families tonight. Praying that they will get a day's wages for a day's work. And who are we decide what that might be?

While it is true, then, that the parable isn't intended specifically to model economic relations, the average corporate executive and hard-working employee still have every reason to be offended. Jesus' kingdom will offend all of us who assume that the future, if it is to be good, must be earned and deserved. Jesus is showing us...in this parable...that we need to step back and re-think our own value system...our own sense of fairness and justice.

We can't 'earn' our way into heaven. We can't 'earn' our way into God's good graces. God is not going to judge us by how busy we stay or by how many hours we put in at the office or by how hard we work. The assessment from God is going to be about the state of our heart, our capacity for forgiveness, our willingness to reach out to those in need, our sense of God's presence in the world, and our willingness to follow Jesus wherever he leads us.

The point of this parable is that God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness are God's to give away as God sees fit.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.