**16th SUNDAY after PENTECOST SERMON: Matthew 20:1-16**

**SEPTEMBER 20, 2020**

For the past several Sundays, we reflected on Christian discipleship: on the call and on the demands of discipleship. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus continues his instruction about discipleship on his way to Jerusalem. Here, Jesus talks about one very important and enigmatic challenge to those who follow him, namely, -- SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST WILL BE LAST. (verse 16)

Jesus illustrates this enigmatic challenge with a parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Jesus shows in the story what happens when THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST WILL BE LAST is translated in the concrete.

The story goes: A landowner hired workers early in the morning and promised to pay them what amounted to minimum wage – one denarius. This was considered the basic subsistence for a man to feed his family for a day. The landowner then went back at nine o’clock, at noon, at three o’clock and at five o’clock and hired more workers. He told them simply that he’d pay them what was right.

At the end of the day the landowner had all the workers line up starting with those who came LAST at five o’clock. Lo and behold, he paid those who came LAST a denarius, a full day’s wage. So far, so good. In the laborers’ minds, they’ve already got it figured out –if he paid one denarius for one hour’s work, then he must be going to pay one denarius per hour. So they’re going to get a pro rata share of one denarius per hour. The laborers who came FIRST must have been counting 12 denarii for 12 hours work. According to our standards, that’d be fair.

This is where the parable takes an unexpected turn, for as the workers filed by to receive their wages, he paid them all the same – one denarius each, no matter how long they worked.

“Hey, that’s not fair!” they complained. The landowner was not playing by *their* rules, by their calculations. Never mind that they got precisely what they were promised; [2He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day]. But the fact that the others got the same was a pill too big to swallow. As we often hear our children and grandchildren say, when one sibling or grandchild gets a better shake than another, "It's not fair!"

Let’s face it. The parable seems to run counter to our most deeply cherished values, the value of hard work and just reward: The more you work and the more productive you are, the more you ought to get paid. So we share the offense of the all day-workers. We don’t want to be on par, we want to be on top. We don’t want mercy and generosity (what God gives freely). We want justice (what we have earned) plus of course – mercy… a little more would not hurt.

So what is the lesson to be learned from the gospel reading about the laborers in the vineyard?

Let us remember that what we have here is a parable told in the context of the story about discipleship --- of the life of those who follow Jesus. Specifically then, the question to be asked is this: Now that we have answered the call to discipleship, what is in store for us? (Remember the first disciples… we have left everything and followed you, what now?....What is our reward?) Now that we have responded to your invitation to work in your vineyard, what can we expect in terms of payment?

The first answer found in the parable is that ‘THE LABORER IS WORTHY OF HIS HIRE’: In the parable, God’s justice is that everyone should be given access to work, and everyone should be given the essential earnings for his need and the needs of his family. And this is God’s justice, not that we get what we deserve, but that we get what we need.

The second answer is found in the relationship that obtains among the workers in the vineyard of the Lord -. Note the problem with the workers who complained the loudest is that they failed to recognize their relationship to each other. Or, to put it another way, the offense of God’s justice is softened when the “all day” workers and the “eleventh hour” workers stop seeing each other as “us and them” and start seeing each other as “we”.

*There’s a play by Timothy Thompson based on this parable in which he depicts two brothers vying for work. John is strong and capable; Philip is just as willing but has lost a hand in an accident. When the landowner comes, John is taken in the first wave of workers, and as he labors in the field he looks up the lane for some sign of Philip. Other workers are brought to the field, but Philip is not among them. John is grateful to have the work, but feels empty knowing that Philip is just as needful as he. Finally, the last group of workers arrive, and Philip is among them. John is relieved to know that Philip will get to work at least one hour. But, as the drama unfolds, and those who came last get paid a full days’ wages, John rejoices, knowing that Philip – his brother – will have the money necessary to feed his family. When it comes his turn to stand before the landowner and receive his pay, instead of complaining as the others, John, remembering his brother Philip, throws out his hand and says with tears in his eyes, “Thank you, my lord, for what you’ve done for us today!”*

In the end, if we see ourselves as a community of disciples, we will see the “eleventh hour” workers as our brothers and sisters whose needs are every bit as important as our own.

Well, I suppose when it’s all said and done, we’ll always feel a little uneasy about the inequities of life – the unfairness of it all. Perhaps we’ll continue to harbor a little resentment toward those who seem to get a free ride. Let’s just say it’s because we’re human, not God. Even so, let’s trust God to be just in spite of our humanness, so that when the day comes when we find ourselves short and needy, as one day it surely will, there’ll be God’s justice, mercy and grace for us as well.

Let us remember this story during this time of the pandemic: let us remember those in need, more than what we need: Let us remember those who are hungrier, poorer, lonelier, sicker, sadder. They are our brothers and sisters. Let us remember the least and the last, and let them be the first. Amen