

PROPER 20, YEAR A
ST LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH, BLACKSTONE

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 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.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to

me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

+++++

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

I enjoyed a very interesting conversation once about this Gospel reading. The other chap argued that these verses showed that Jesus sure didn't have any business sense and that he should have just stuck to spiritual teaching. He added, "Of course Jesus didn't have any business experience: look at what the owner in his story said and did!"

My parishioner, for that is what he then was, had his reasons for his opinions. But on the main point, that this Gospel reading was not 'spiritual', he was totally and lamentably wrong, and that is the point of today's sermon. This is a parable about God, the generosity of the kingdom of heaven, and grace abounding. Even unto this last: us.

The generosity of God, and the signs of God's providential and loving kingdom among us, are somewhat shocking even when we do manage to see them, and that's hard to do from some perspectives.

My parishioner told me that Jesus' vineyard owner was a bad businessman: he got it all wrong. "Listen", he said. "He *should* have paid the last workers less. Three reasons: one was that with the labor costs he saved, he could have bought another vineyard and hired more

workers. He would have maximized his wealth, and that's good stewardship.

Second, it was not exploitation to pay less for less work, it was being fair: distributive justice: "a day's pay for a day's work." Anything other than that would be unfair.

Third: the workers who'd picked grapes all day in the hot Palestinian sun knew the owner's action was unfair and that they had been treated shabbily, and they complained! By his bad business practice, the vineyard owner also succeeded in souring industrial relations."

That's a pretty accurate setting out of the main points. You may agree with them. Think about them for a minute.

This is, I think, a Gospel passage that should have special meaning for the farmers among us. If rain is coming, hay-rotting rain, getting the hay harvest in quickly by any means possible is urgent. The agriculturist in today's Gospel would have been relieved and delighted if he could find more laborers available, even late in the day, to save his crop.

But this doesn't seem to be the issue. There is no mention of a crop-damaging weather crisis.

It is a fact that in Jesus' day in Palestine, there was massive unemployment, especially among unskilled labor. No wonder so many parables used examples that drew on this harsh economic reality.

No doubt everyone realizes that this parable by our Lord could be set in this country today.

The laborers the vineyard owner hired later in the day were among the large numbers of chronic unemployed especially among seasonal field workers; agricultural peasants. Relatively unskilled laborers were called 'hired hands'. Not people, just hands, disposable human hands distinguished by opposable thumbs. Human hands with delicate finger movements that could harvest grapes.

The huge regional unemployment figures among day-laborers would hardly have been touched by the hiring of these last few workers.

The owner of the vineyard seems to have acted out of a sense of solidarity in community. You'll note that this is often a sign of God's providence acting through the good actions of humans. The unemployed, and therefore needy, workers were there, standing on the street corner, hands in their pockets, waiting and hoping all the long dispiriting day. "Maybe tomorrow we'll be lucky. Maybe tomorrow my family can eat....".

The owner had the means to hire them, he didn't plan on begging himself. This isn't one of those occasions where Jesus tells people to give everything away to the poor. The landowner could have hired more workers for a pittance, less than the cost of a crust of bread. That is made clear. He could have maximized his profits but chose not to. This Gospel passage outrages some for that very reason. But in his generosity of spirit, he chose to pay each worker a full day's wage. And you should realize that all the workers, the early hires, and the later ones,

were local. The owner must have known them in the farming community where he and they lived.

He may also have known that what he chose to do, his gracious generosity, meant that more local families could eat that night which might otherwise go hungry.

Of course the ones who'd worked all day in the hot Palestinian sun were miffed. Not because they had been underpaid, nor paid less than they had agreed, but because the owner chose to pay equal pay for less work. And that seems unjust. But, as wise people know, tomorrow is another day. Tomorrow, on the local scale, the first may be last. Tomorrow the ones doing the complaining might be the wallflowers left wilting in the marketplace as the sun went down. Maybe they rather knew that and hoped to gouge a few more coins to carry them over through hard times to come. We are not told that, but you can see the thinking.

But there has often been a tension between the strict application of the law of contracts and mercy even in human affairs.

With God, according to Jesus, the scales are inclined to tip towards mercy. And for that, we should thank God, we who come so late in the day in the long centuries of Christian history. We have arrived late, after many lifetimes of the self-giving love and labor in the service of God and the neighbor, by priests and people. They lived the petition, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God, in God's mercy, promises

the same reward of eternal life to all who work for the coming of the Kingdom. Us included; thanks be to God.

In the Gospel reading, and in this sermon, there is one thing missing. The laborers, early and late, worked for only for money. In this they suffered the indignity of those who have worked for subsistence; food and shelter. They were hired hands, not hired men and women. Not humans finding satisfaction or delight in their work, but a more-or-less mechanical means to an end. Their precarious material life also was humiliating.

And when they were sick, or old and crippled, and could no longer pick grapes for a landowner, they would be cast aside.

The Kingdom of God in which we live, and move, and have our being, in which we strive, is not like that. Thanks be to God. Yes, thanks be to God, for no-one can deserve the reward of God after much labor or little. We cannot earn God's good grace. The idea of a Christian Society, if that is what we claim to be, must be modeled on the divine generosity we see in the parable.

That one note of humanity, that one glimpse of the light of God in this parable, was the generosity of the owner of the vineyard. That is what makes Jesus' teaching a spiritual parable, suitable to be read in a Christian church, and in a Christian society, suitable to guide us in our lives and work.

Whose vineyard do we labor in?

Lord, have mercy, we say. Lord, help us to be merciful too, as you are merciful, for the sake of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

God bless us all.

Your priest and friend,

John+

--

John Maxwell Kerr, SOfc,