

Better Than I Deserve

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Hymn: "Salvation unto Us Has Come" (*LSB* 555)

I suppose we're tempted to read the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard from an economic perspective and see it as a kind of labor dispute. That happens sometimes. You listen to Jesus' parable and you get stuck in the surface of the story rather than probe deeper and inquire as to what it's about. Part of the problem today is that our reading has been lifted out of the 20th chapter of Matthew and presented to us in isolation from the entire rest of the Gospel. There really is a broader context behind the story which helps us to see what's behind it.

For that, you have to back up to Matthew 19. It's the account of the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks him what he must do in order to be saved. They have a bit of conversation, but finally Jesus says, "Sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and then follow me." Essentially, Jesus invites the young man to become one of his disciples, to come and follow Him. "Join me and my entourage." As you may remember, the rich young man declines the offer. But what follows is that Peter, scratching his head, says to Jesus, "Well, you know, Lord, we apostles have given up everything. We have given up our homes and our livelihoods to follow you." A real pat-yourself-on-the-back moment for Peter. But the implication of what he's saying is very clear. In relation to the story Jesus is about to tell, Peter equates himself with those laborers who have been out in the vineyard longer. "We've been here from the beginning, Jesus. We've been with the company from the ground up." In other words, we deserve some special consideration. We've really put forth a great effort.

That Jesus tells the parable in response to Peter helps us to recognize that He isn't talking about economics. He's talking about a problem that inheres within the human heart, within each of us. We are so easily drawn to conclude that somehow I personally deserve more or I deserve greater consideration because of this or that, because I have worked harder, because I have suffered more, which necessarily implies somebody else deserves less than. That's the problem this parable addresses.

All of which raises the question, How does this happen? How is it we come to the conviction or the conclusion that our case is special? Well, it's what you might call the incommunicability of personal experience. You just don't know what anybody else's experience is really like. What we see as we interact with each other is that which lies on the surface; we rarely have that backstage view to the inner struggles or the inner wrestling that other person is dealing with. That's just not visible to us. We're aware of it in our own selves but not with others; we just see what lies there on the surface.

You're out driving in the country and you see one of those gigantic houses that people build. They have a boat in the driveway and a couple of jet skis. You think, They've got it all. But what you're seeing is just the outside. You don't see anything about the lives of the people that are inside. Maybe they're wrestling with depression. Maybe their families are falling to pieces. What you see doesn't by any stretch of the imagination tell the whole story. And that's exacerbated by the fact that in public and in front of one another we human beings put on a kind of show, a certain kind of appearance, a makeover to cover up what's going on.

That's what's going on in the parable. Jesus uses this symbolic language of a vineyard and workers, but you have these guys who come at just the last. On the

surface, it looks to those who have been out there working all day that these guys got off really easy. They hardly had to do any work. It looks completely unfair. But those guys in the fields don't know the experience of these other people. They don't take into consideration that maybe they suffered and struggled more. They stood in the marketplace all day long. No one would hire them. They stood around thinking how are they going to feed their wives and children that night. That's a tough road to hoe. But because the all-day workers deal only with the surface, they aren't able to sympathize with these other characters in the story.

This is part of what makes the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ so encouraging and assuring: a Creator who sympathizes with the experience of His creatures. God is way up in heaven and we think, How can He possibly understand what it's like to be a human? How can He understand what our experience is like? Then He becomes man. He enters into the same situation and the same experience that we have that that sympathy can be there. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:14). Ultimately as we try to manifest the love of God in Christ Jesus to one another, that ought to be our goal, to sympathize, to recognize, knowing that we can't fully integrate ourselves into the internal experience of others, but at least to understand and imagine that there is more there than the surface.

Precisely because these characters in the parable see only what happens on the surface, they perceive the master as being in some way unfair to them. It's sort of funny, because he pays everybody the same. What could be fairer than that? But they see him as unjust or unfair. We struggle with that. Is God indeed fair? We look at the

surface of things and we conclude, well, no, this guy over here has so much more than that guy over there. That seems to us unfair. But it bears saying that to treat people equally does not mean to treat them identically. We get those two ideas mixed up. If you have multiple children, you realize each child is different. You want to be fair with them, but you don't necessarily treat them all identically.

God *is* fair. Very plainly in the parable, the master says, "I'm treating you fair." In fact, that He's fair is their complaint. They say, You have made us *equal to them*. As if that's a problem! The guys who are hired first don't get it. And they struggle with it. So they come and complain. They vocalize their complaint. And let me say that I think that's the best thing they do in the parable. It's the one thing they do right. We don't typically think of complaining as the most commendable behavior, but there is something to be said about giving voice to our dissatisfaction and discontentment—not endlessly complaining perhaps—but complaining as opposed to bottling it all up inside. The culture tells us in various ways, "Stop your complaining. No one wants to hear it." So, we stuff it inside. And yet there is a time and a place to vent, to be able to unburden yourself, and to complain to God in particular. After all, you're not going to injure Him. He can take it. He will listen. The Psalmists again and again complain to God. They don't just keep their mouths shut when they see things not in keeping with their expectations. They complain to the Master.

But there's a flip side to complaining, where it does become hurtful to others. You say, "Oh, I've got it so bad. I deserve better." Which implies someone else is lesser. You come back from a nice vacation and then your friend says, "I wish I could afford to go on a vacation like that." And then you feel like dirt as if you did something

wicked by taking a vacation. They want to play up their poor state and call attention to not having the same privileges you do, and that's a way of being hurtful towards others.

I bring this up, because there's a detail in the parable that before this week I'd never really considered before, at least not from this angle and it has to do with the way the paychecks get distributed. The master tells the foreman "Pay first the guys who came last." And the eleventh hour guys get their paycheck. What do they do then? Of course, elated, they run home and show the wife and children. They run to the marketplace and buy a nice steak dinner. They're not sticking around to see what everybody else gets. That means when the guys who have been working all day, when it's their turn and they start complaining, the eleventh-hour guys aren't there. I've only thought about it in terms of the owner baiting the all-day guys, making them see what the eleventh-hour guys got and provoking their envy. He could have reversed it, started with the all-day guys, paid them their denarius; they would have never known and never gotten unhappy. But by going last-in-first-out, the eleventh hour guys are spared being told or hearing that they're not worth the same as these other guys.

There's a beautiful saying I came across a while back, and I wish I could tell you exactly who said it. Some credit J.M. Barrie, the author of *Peter Pan*. Others say, no, Barrie just expanded on something the philosopher Plato originally said. The quote is this: "Be kinder than necessary, because everyone you meet is fighting a great battle." I really like that. We don't know what goes on inside the hearts and minds of other people. We ought to be charitable and we ought to be kind. And we ought not draw the conclusion that my circumstance or my difficulty is exceptional or egregious or beyond what other people have to go through.

In the end, though, this is truly a happy parable. Sometimes Jesus' parables end on a solemn note, like the one about the unmerciful servant, where we're left with the unmerciful servant sitting in jail, not having reached any kind of enlightenment or understanding. But this parable is definitely a happy one, and in this way: These all-day guys who are a little thick-headed and hard-hearted, who complain and think the master isn't being fair, don't lose their wages! Listening to the parable as it's building to its climax, you expect that they're going to get chewed out and have their wage taken back and be thrown out on the road. But what a joyous portrayal of a Lord who is eminently patient, even with hard-hearted sinners like you and me! It signals to us in the loveliest way that we all receive so much better than we deserve. God does not pull the rug out from under us just because our behavior isn't always the most becoming. And one of the ways this equality with which God treats people is beautifully captured and beautifully embodied is in the Sacrament of the Altar, which we now proceed to celebrate. Here we come from our diverse places in life and our diverse circumstances and experiences and we are all treated the same. No one gets more. No one gets less. We all get the same mercy and forgiveness in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Which is why, if you remember, that scene in 1 Corinthians 11 is so hateful to St. Paul. The church gathers and some are loading up their plates and some are going without anything. They've turned the blessed meal into a situation where there is a sort of ordering and ranking and making comparisons. St. Paul tells them, We don't do that. The Sacrament is to be the exact opposite of that. It is this great equalizer. It is this lovely moment that says to each and every person God loves you just the same.

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