

September 20, 2020: Matthew 20 1-16 (Proper 20)

Today's Gospel is a challenge. Those who work one hour receive the same wages as those who work all day! It is so unfair, inequitable; just plain wrong. This is a reasonable reaction if Jesus is teaching about economics, but he is not.

The parables are analogies intended to illustrate a theological truth. Parables begin with a scene from everyday life, but soon there is a character, action or detail that is unrealistic, exaggerated, even absurd. As analogies, a character or action may represent an actual group of human beings, or God—for instance here the first-hired workers represent the disciples—but not every character, action or detail does so. Analogies are always incomplete: a way of understanding but not the only or all-inclusive way. Therefore, there are many parables, each provides a unique view of God's Being and actions; but no one parable 'sums it all up.'

As mentioned, the first-hired workers represent the disciples. We see this from the context. In the previous chapter (19:16ff) Jesus encounters the rich young man who, while morally faultless, declines Jesus' call to sell all and follow. Then Peter asks Jesus about the Disciples who have left everything. Jesus says those who do so will receive a hundred-fold of such things, and eternal life. Then this parable; there is no narrative break; Jesus is challenging his own followers with the story.

What is the point? As with all parables, the point is at end. In verse 15 Jesus says: *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?* Of course, these are rhetorical questions—the answers obvious. What God gives is the reality of forgiveness, redemption, salvation. God gives because God *is* goodness, mercy, compassion, loving-kindness—that reach beyond all human categories of fairness and justice. Yet here is our struggle. We *want* fairness and justice, *as we define it*. Have you had a driver blast by you on the highway going 10 or 20 miles over the speed limit and said, "Where is a cop when you need one?!" You want the person to 'get what they deserve.' Of course, when I go 10 or 20 over—my reasons are always good ones—I hope all police are at the donut shop, or elsewhere catching 'real' lawbreakers. The fact is, we never get what we deserve from God; we always receive much more than we deserve, because God loves us so generously and 'unjustly' by human standards.

I hope you agree with this truth of God's generosity. Yet there is much more in this parable, and it involves that second rhetorical question. The translation is tricky: most versions render it: *Are you envious because I am generous*; this wording is accessible, but not accurate. The literal translation: *Is your eye evil because I am good?*

In the ancient world to have an evil eye was to look at others with envy, leading to malice. Jesus is accusing his Disciples of insisting God's Kingdom be governed by *their* idea of fairness. A fixation on their 'rights' in the Kingdom, *their* status, *their* place, *their* privileges, *their* reward, *their* comfort, *their* seniority—is to see with 'evil eyes' because none of it is consistent with God's goodness for all.

We see God's generosity in Jesus, who gave up all rights and privileges as Son of God to become Son of Man. Paul writes in Philippians 2: Jesus did not count equality with God as something to exploit but emptied himself, becoming a slave...humbling himself, obedient to death. Even his glory as crucified and risen Lord is not his own but is given him by the Father. To be Jesus' follower, is to imitate him. As a follower, his mission is our mission.

The Prayer Book Catechism sums it up: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members (BCP, page 855)."

Our mission is to bring God's mad justice, lived out in welcome, mercy, compassion, forgiveness, gentleness, and loving-kindness. All are welcome because God's mercy-filled justice is for all. It does not matter if one has been here 50 years or 5 minutes. Each one is a blessing—God gifts us with each other—so we may see more and more the grace of God at work in peoples' lives, so that more join us in living in and for Christ. All are welcome, all are blessed beyond human goodness because God loves all with His own perfect justice.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.