

The Generosity of Jesus

No parable sends people through the roof as quickly as next Sunday's. Any pea-brain knows if you put someone to work at 8:00 a.m. and someone else to work at 4:00 p.m. and they both finish the work day at 5:00 p.m., you don't pay them the same wage. It's un-American.

Small wonder people remembered Jesus' stories. Few speakers weave a tale as masterfully as he. Two thousand years hence these parables still keep our interest, and like this one (Matthew 20:1-16) they can still make your blood boil.

A landowner goes to the marketplace several times to hire workers throughout the day. Some work long hours through the scorching heat. Others arrive just in time for the cool evening. At the end of the day, the bookkeeper assembles the workers and starts by paying the last. This only heightens the anticipation of those who arrived first in the vineyard. You can just see them rubbing their hands in gleeful anticipation: one hour's work equals one full day's pay! They must have figured they'd get eight to twelve times the going rate for a day's work.

But the glee turns glum. Those who worked hardest get the same measly salary. The end. In the verse preceding this parable, Jesus said, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (19:30). To conclude this parable he inverts the order: "The last will be first, and the first will be last" (20:16). Clever, huh? But it still doesn't take the sting from the injustice felt by those who labored longest.

This parable comes in the last main division of Matthew's gospel. Matthew has divided his work into five pairs of narratives and discourses; next week our Sunday lectionary opens the fifth pair. It will fix our attention from now till Advent. We begin with the narrative; soon we'll hear the final discourse. The story of Jesus' passion and resurrection, which we've already heard this liturgical year, concludes Matthew's work after the fifth discourse. As book five begins, Jesus has left Galilee and begun his journey to Jerusalem. From now to the end of the church year, the shadow of the cross slants ever sharper. This parable piques us more promptly than even the predictions of the passion. It warns that things are not what they seem.

Those looking for an easy way out of this parable meet disappointment. Some details clean the story, but they don't water down its conclusion. Searching for workers in the marketplace was common practice. In fact, it happens in the United States even today near the border. People we call "illegal aliens" sneak into the States and find citizens willing to hire by day. The biblical vineyard frequently symbolizes Israel (e.g. Isaiah 5). The workers' grumbling reminds us of the Israelites complaining about the lousy desert cuisine on their way to the promised land (Exodus 16:2).

We try hard to reconcile our concept of fairness with the conclusion of this parable, but nothing gives. How can Jesus justify paying all those short-timers so well? Does their all-day intention count for work, as in the parable of the two sons in the next chapter of Matthew (21:31)?

In all likelihood the parable is leveled against community grumblers. Matthew's community, a generation or so after the death of Jesus, held both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Some had come to the faith earlier than others. Some had possession of the covenant earlier than others. By retelling this parable of Jesus, Matthew was able to scold those in his community who grumbled that latecoming disciples would unfairly receive the same rewards as those who arrived first.

It's not fair when younger kids get permissions more quickly than their older siblings did. Or when some children celebrate confirmation earlier than others. Or when some people get engaged earlier than others. Or when some live shorter lives than others, with no regard for their virtue.

The parable proclaims that merit doesn't work the way we think it should. As if we needed proof. Innocents die of incurable diseases, traffic accidents, and terrorism on flight 800. The system of reward just doesn't add up--if we're thinking by human standards. God's standards know no time. They are ultimately founded on generosity, even amidst what appears unjust and tragic to human eyes. We think we know who should be first and who should be last, but we do not. "Friend," Jesus says to us, "I am doing you no wrong. Take what belongs to you and go." We know in our hearts when God treats us fairly, and when God gives us a break. If justice seems obscure, it's because God's generosity is so extreme.

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