

## Proper 20, Year A

September 21, 2014

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.”*

Today’s Gospel parable is perhaps the most difficult of all Jesus’ parables for us 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Americans to understand and accept. A landowner goes to the marketplace early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. He finds some workers, they agree on the usual daily wage, and the landowner sends them into his vineyard. At 9:00am, the landowner sees some fellows just hanging around idle in the marketplace. He asks them why they are standing around idle, and then sends *them* into this vineyard, also, telling them he will pay them whatever is just. He does the same at noon and 3pm. At 5pm, he sees *others* just standing around idle in the marketplace. He asks *them* why they are standing around idle, and then sends them, also, into his vineyard – not even mentioning what he would pay.

When the sun goes down, the landowner has his manager call all the workers together and to pay them, beginning with the last ones hired and ending with the first ones hired. Those hired at 5pm receive the usual daily wage. When the landowner gives those hired at 6am the *same* usual daily wage, they grumble, because they have worked hard in the sun all day, and by rights should get **more** than the ones who only worked an hour. But the landowner says 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?" The logic of the landowner is unassailable, but it still seems so *unfair!*

John Shea writes: "This feeling of unfairness springs from a well-constructed mental tape. Its basic message is: 'If someone gets what I am getting but hasn't put in as much work as I have, I am being cheated...' Most of us have this tape running continually... The truth of this tape seems obvious because it confirms our fundamental stance. We are the center of the universe, and we evaluate everything that happens from the point of view of our own comparative well-being." (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 283)

Fr. Shea notes that both the workers hired *first* **and** those hired *last* are responding to their own ego-interests. The **first** workers *lament* the salary difference because it does not benefit *them*. The **last** workers *praise* the salary difference because it DOES benefit them. *Both* are fixated on what benefits them; both are centered on self.

My friends, let's face it: this is the system we know and live within, and that is why this parable is so hard to comprehend. Comparing ourselves with others and judging who is *more* worthy or *less* worthy is part of our social DNA. Had the first workers not **known** that the last workers got the same as *they* did, they would have been content. It is only after observing the owner's generosity toward others that they complain. "Are you envious because I am generous?" the landowner asks. You bet we are!

I remember John Rohde once telling me that when he and Jocie were Directors of El Hogar Orphanage and Schools in Honduras, and one of their primary responsibilities was to raise funds in the United States, they thought that if Americans would just be able to see these wonderful Honduran children, they would open their pocketbooks. So John and Jocie brought some of the El Hogar boys to the United States on a fundraising trip. But they soon had to stop doing those kinds of trips. Not because the scheme didn't help raise funds – it did; it's what the experience did to the boys that was the problem. Those boys were perfectly happy and content with their lives in Honduras until they saw what comparatively extravagant lives children live in the United States. They could never again be as content in Honduras as they were *before* they had been to the United States.

We see this phenomenon repeated over and over again – in life, and in the Bible. In another famous parable, an older Son seems happy with his life until his prodigal younger brother returns and his Father throws a huge party for his undeserving younger son. Even Peter, after Jesus' resurrection, points to his fellow disciple John (whom the Gospel describes as "the disciple Jesus loved"), and Peter asks Jesus, "What about him?" (John 21:21) Jesus in essence tells Peter, "What happens to him is none of your business. You just follow me." (vss. 22-23)

We live out our lives in an economic and social system based on merit, reward, comparison and competition. Our world runs on the merit system; and given the reality of our self-centered human nature, it is perhaps necessary to counteract our self-centeredness! If our world did not reward the hard-working, the creative and industrious, there would be little motivation (according to our **worldly** consciousness) to put forth any effort. Imagine if workers here in this earthly realm of ours were always rewarded like the one-hour workers in our parable. The all-day workers would think, “Why should I work all day, when I can work only an hour and get paid the same?” And before long, *nobody* would come to work until 5:00 in the evening. That’s why we have such a hard time with this parable!

But my friends, this kind of reasoning totally misses the point, for the parable is *not* telling us how **this world** should be run. Jesus introduces the parable by saying, “The **kingdom of heaven** is like...” Perhaps the parable is contrasting the worker’s focus on *wages* (which is what **we** are concerned about) with the landowner’s focus on – what? The landowner seems little concerned about wages or worthiness. What *is* the landowner concerned about in this story?

Fr. Shea writes: “From the Lord of the Vineyard’s point of view, what really matters is not *what you get* but *that you work in the vineyard*. The real problem is idleness in the marketplace [and what that represents]. You do not comprehend that a larger reality permeates your physical, mental, and social life and calls you to join with it in harvesting a new human reality. Therefore, you stand around waiting. But this Lord of the Vineyard will have none of it. The owner visits the marketplace often and sends everyone off to the vineyard...”

“Once in the vineyard, you are in the owner’s domain, and the rules change because of who the owner is and what the owner is about. The work itself is the reward. The joy is in the contribution, in the ecstasy of joining with the Lord of the Vineyard in the creation of the world... You are now in a consciousness called the kingdom of heaven and not in a consciousness that could be called ‘Comparative Status’ or ‘Fear of Not Getting What You Deserve.’” (ibid., pp. 284-285)

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus told his disciples to “pray for the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” (Matthew 9:37-38) And now here is this landowner sending out laborers into his vineyard. It is a consistent theme in Matthew’s Gospel. Go work in the vineyard! Live and work in the kingdom of God!

Looking back a few verses *before* today’s Gospel reading, we see that Jesus tells this parable in response to a question from Peter: “We left everything and followed you,” Peter tells Jesus. “What do we **get** out of it?” (Matthew 19:27, *The Message*) This parable is Jesus’ answer to Peter. It says: “You get to

participate in the life and work of the kingdom of God – that is your reward. And God will make sure that everyone who lives and works in his kingdom will be given the usual daily wage, which is – no more, no less – what people need to work in the vineyard. Our *daily* bread, for we are dependent *each day*, anew, on the life and grace God gives us. Each day. Just as the manna in the wilderness could not be stored up for the next day, but had to be given each day from God, so that the Israelites would realize their total dependence on God, so we each receive our daily wage, our daily bread – the grace that is needed to live and work in the kingdom of God, not a reward for the number of hours we work. “We cannot save and hoard,” Father Shea writes, “and in the process become independent and move outside God’s sustaining life...”

“You no longer live in the envious world of comparison but in the abundant world of God’s goodness... [In the economy of the kingdom of God,] the Lord of the Vineyard has no choice. God **has** to give you all that God has. Which, of course, is one day’s wages.” (ibid., pp. 280, 285) The grace we need to live and work in God’s kingdom – the greatest reward we could ever be given.

AMEN