

Proper 20A 2020 Sermon

September 20, 2020

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.”*

A landowner goes to the marketplace early in the morning and hires some day laborers to work in his vineyard. They agree on the usual daily wage. At 9:00am, the landowner sees some fellows standing idle in the marketplace, and he sends *them* into his vineyard, also, telling them he will pay them whatever is just. He does the same at noon and 3pm. At 5pm, he sees *others* standing idle in the marketplace, and he sends them, also, into his vineyard – not even mentioning what he would pay them.

When the sun goes down, the landowner has his manager call all the workers together and 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 one 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 workers hired *first* judge their situation *in comparison with* the situation of others. Had the first workers not **known** that the last workers got the same as *they*

did, they would have been content with the daily wage they had agreed upon. 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 say, "we," because I would venture to guess that most of **us** see *ourselves* as one of the hard-working, all-day laborers; and therefore, we see the Lord of the Vineyard as being unfair toward us. Our long hours of work in the heat of the day should earn us far more than those workers who worked only one hour!

Now, note that the Lord of the Vineyard does not criticize the 5pm workers because they are *lazy*. He is concerned that they are *idle*. The root word in the New Testament Greek is *ergon*, from which we get our English word "energy." If you remember from your high school science class, an "erg" is a measure of energy. Now, we know that the opposite of "symmetric" is "a-symmetric," and the opposite of "moral" is "a-moral." The opposite of *ergon* is *a-ergon*, or *argon*, which is the word translated in our Gospel as "idle." Idleness is the opposite of energy. The Lord of the Vineyard is concerned that the idle workers are not involved in the energy of the Vineyard, the energy of the Kingdom of God. They are not drawn up into the power of the Holy Spirit, the Flow of the Holy Trinity; they have not become part of the Divine Flow which creates and invigorates all things.

My friends, I think the reason that we have such a hard time with this parable is that we fail to realize that it is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. We *think* it is a story about workers in the kind of market economy in which we live out our earthly lives. But Jesus begins the parable by saying, "The *kingdom of heaven* is like..." The parable contrasts **our** focus on *wages* with the landowner's focus on – on *what*? The landowner seems little concerned about what is "fair" from the point of view of **this** world's market economies; little concerned about paying people according to the number of hours they worked. What *is* the landowner concerned about?

John 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*... [We] do not comprehend that a larger [spiritual] reality permeates [our] physical, mental, and social life and calls [us] to join with it in harvesting a new human reality.

"Once in the vineyard, [we] 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... [We] 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 [we] Deserve.'"¹

The joy is in the contribution, in the ecstasy of joining with the Lord of the Vineyard in the creation of a new and better world: God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, a kingdom where the kind of comparative judgment of work and worth which we find in our parable is not operative. Each person is loved and valued for who they uniquely are and for their contribution and participation in joining the Divine Energy Flow in creating the kingdom of God on earth, as in heaven.

There is no hierarchy in this Flow. Jeff Bezos is no more important or valued than a grocery store bagger – nor is he more highly compensated by the Lord of the Vineyard. Every person who participates in the Flow of Divine Energy which is creating the kingdom of God on earth will receive the usual daily wage, which is – no more, no less – our *daily* bread. In the emerging kingdom of heaven come on earth, most of the problems which beset our world today – divisiveness; turning a blind eye to our own destruction of God's fragile earth, our island home; pressing our own advantage over and against the wellbeing of others; tribalism; nationalism; egotism; racism; sexism; idolatry; hatred; violence; hypocrisy; deceit; manipulation (you know the list as well as I) – all of these will fade away as the Flow of Divine Energy suffuses every aspect of our lives, changing our value structure, our perspective, our consciousness.

Seek **first** the kingdom of God, and all these things – our daily bread, our daily wage – will be given unto us.

And so the question which this parable asks me is: Am I doing the work of the kingdom? Oh, I may be working hard at my job, earning money; but the parable is not about that. It is about whether you and I are working in the vineyard of our Lord, where the economy of the Kingdom of God is operative and where abundant Life for all is cultivated.

What about you? What about me? Have we joined the Flow of Divine Energy working to create the kingdom of God on earth, which is its own reward? Or do we remain steeped in this world's ego consciousness, seeking what is best for ourselves, and demanding what is our due?

AMEN

1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 284-285