

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)

Matthew 20.1-16

September 21, 2008

Holy Trinity, Manasquan

I drove by the Acme parking lot this/yesterday morning about 11 a.m. and saw a couple of groups of Hispanic men standing around. Chances are, just like the guys in today's Gospel, the fellows I saw are hoping for day labor. There are no vineyards close by, but there are plenty of yards serviced by landscaping companies and plenty of construction sites that apparently hire these men, hoping to make some money to help support their families.

If I were really scientific about all this, I would have driven past Acme at 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. too, seeing if the number of people gets smaller as the hours tick by. Chances are, there were fewer men there at 11 than at 7, because some of them hopefully got jobs and left.

Imagine this, though – you're one of the folks who gets picked up at 7 a.m., having been offered an hourly wage you can accept. As time goes on, the boss realizes there's more work to be done before dark than the present number of workers can pull off. He's going to lose money if he doesn't finish the job today. So he goes back to Acme at 9, noon, 3 and 5, bringing back more guys every time. It's finally quitting time, let's say 7 p.m. The boss tells the foreman he can pay those workers, but should start with the newcomers first. They're expecting only a couple hours pay, because that's all they worked. But they open their pay envelopes, and find 12 hours of wages inside! The others can't help but see their glee, and have high hopes for how much **they'll** be walking away with, because they worked longer (and harder) than those Johnny-come-latelies, and figure they'll make out like bandits.

Imagine their surprise – and dismay – and anger – when they realize every envelope contains the same amount of money! They feel like they've been cheated out of something that's rightfully theirs, because they worked all day, and made the same amount of money as those who barely broke a sweat, having clocked just 2 hours at the cooler end of the day.... They mumble and grumble and then finally decide to say something. As *The Message* puts it:

Taking [their money], they groused angrily to the manager, “These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.” (Matthew 20.11-12)

When you put yourself in their shoes, as if you were one of those day laborers waiting at the Manasquan Acme today, can you blame them?? Would **you** take that lying down?? If day labor isn’t something you can identify with, imagine being with a company that gives out year-end bonuses. You’ve worked there for twenty-five years. A co-worker just arrived at Thanksgiving. You get the same bonus. Wouldn’t that burn you? Or let’s say you’re been part of a dance or theatre company for five years, and the kid who just signed up gets the best part in the upcoming recital or play. Wouldn’t that bother you? I’ll be honest. I’d be bothered. I’d think, in **any** of those situations, “That’s not fair!”

And what’s the boss’ answer? Really, what’s **God’s** answer, because God’s the one who has filled those envelopes:

“Friend, I haven’t been unfair. We agreed on the wage... didn’t we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can’t I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?” (*The Message*, Matthew 20. 13-15)

The Greek word translated as “friend” is interesting. There’s an edge to it. One Bible interpreter (Robert Farrar Capon) has said it’s more like, “Buster” or “Pal,” as in “Look, Pal.” God doesn’t really for our self-righteousness about what we do or don’t deserve, and our impatience with the unworthy people who receive God’s mercy.

We’re Lutherans, so we talk a good game about salvation being a free gift of God that none of us could ever earn. If anybody asked us, “Do you believe in works righteousness?” meaning “Do you believe that if you do enough good stuff you can earn a pass into heaven?” we’d say a quick and emphatic “No!” And yet....

If I’m the Sunday School teacher who has taught for thirty years, and if I die and meet at the pearly gates the person who didn’t agree to sub for me even once in all that time, might I not be a little miffed? What if I’m the person who not only served on Council, but agreed to serve two back-to-back full terms on the toughest committee of all (whatever that is ☺), and I’m in heaven alongside the person who never attended one committee meeting, might I not feel a little superior? And if I’ve made it to Holy Trinity using 4 wheel drive in

the winter, and been the only person in worship other than the pastor, in the middle of a snowstorm, and came in the summer even when a power outage made the temp in the sanctuary soar to 90 degrees and 100% humidity, and I'm sharing a table at the heavenly banquet with my neighbor who came on Christmas and Easter, but only if the weather was good, might I not wonder, "What's wrong with this picture?" Sinners that we are, yes, we might wonder why we don't get a better seat, or at least an extra course at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

And our loving God will say, "I wanted you to serve Me and My people like you did not because you thought you were earning brownie points, or climbing rungs on a ladder to Heaven, but because you were so glad, so grateful, that I love you so much!" That when you saw My Son on the cross, you heard us say, "We love you this much!" I wanted the God-given gifts you chose to share to be your way of living out faith-active-in-love, not some kind of spiritual work-out to win a gold medal. I want you to realize that I love you like crazy, but whatever you did, whatever you gave, great as it was in human terms, couldn't begin to match what I have given you: life, abundant life through My Spirit, eternal life through My Son.

Live in My love. Don't be ticked off that you're not the only recipient of My mercy. None of you are worthy, but all of you are precious. Don't question My generosity. Accept My love and don't begrudge it to others. Try to be more like Me, says God. Don't keep checking the ledger to see who did what and for how long. I'm not. As someone has said,

"Bookkeeping is the only punishable offense in the kingdom of heaven. ...[T]here is only [one book,] the Book of Life."

And you're in it, unless you choose **not** to be because of the crazy "salary scale" or because of the company you'll have to keep.

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham