

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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The Eleventh Hour

A major theme in Matthew's gospel is "The Kingdom of Heaven." Jesus tells a number of parables that begin, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like...". We've been listening to them over the past several weeks. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant who finds a pearl of great value...", "The kingdom of heaven is like a woman kneading yeast into dough...", "The Kingdom of heaven is like a man sowing seed. Some fell on good soil..."

Many of these parables speak to the qualities of God's reign. But there is another aspect to these teachings. Some parables speak directly to a moral mandate. Last Sunday we heard, "The kingdom of heaven can be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves..." You might remember that there was a slave who owed the king an impossibly large sum of money. The king had compassion for him and forgave his entire debt, but the slave did not do so in turn. That parable identified a quality that we need in order to be a part of the Kingdom of heaven. Mercy and compassion are to be "paid forward" with mercy compassion and forgiveness to others, even seventy times seven!

That brings us to today's gospel reading, beginning as we've been accustomed to, with, "...the Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers. ..."

Some parables seem very straight forward; some are opaque and demand interpretation. Some parables are difficult to hear, at least to some listeners. Let me tell you a story:

In 1995 I was a member of St. Justin Roman Catholic Church in Santa Clara. At the parish I was a teacher / facilitator in the program for preparing adults for Baptism or reception into the Catholic Church. The participants went through three stages during their preparation, beginning with a period of inquiry, which consisted in open question and answer, short presentations and always a period of bible study, focusing on the parables of Jesus.

One evening in the fall of that year, the inquiry group, about ten men and women, had a bible study on the text we heard today, typically called the Parable of the Eleventh Hour. We read the parable and had a couple of moments to reflect. When I invited comments, a man in his thirties, a Syrian Orthodox who was intending to become Roman Catholic prior to marrying his Catholic fiancé, became very agitated. He spoke up, his voice rising a bit, "I don't believe this! This is wrong!"

I asked, "What do you mean?"

His voice still rising, he said, “That’s not right! God is *always* fair!”

I wanted to give him room to state his discomfort, and I suggested that there might be other aspects to the story. But he was having none of it.

He stood up, shouting, “NO! It’s not right. I don’t believe it!” And he stormed out of the room. There was dead silence. His fiancé, flustered, stood up and started walking toward the door. She tried to apologize for him. I said, “That’s OK. When he comes back we’ll talk about it. Tell him not to worry.”

We never saw him again.

I have often thought about that night, and wondered what might have happened in that poor guy’s life that this story triggered him so badly. I suspect that most of us, hearing this story, — and certainly I speak for myself — relate to the workers who entered the field at dawn and labored the entire day. I understand why those first workers felt aggrieved. The pay situation just felt “unfair.”

In our economy most workers are employees, or in long term contracted relationship with their employer. At the bottom of the economic pyramid are day workers. It may be difficult to relate to the situation of the day workers from the perspective most of us have as employees. But think about the times you’ve driven to Home Depot or Lowes. We’ve seen the men — mostly men — standing around the parking lot, waiting for work. These workers receive no benefits; no paid sick leave, paid vacation, paid holidays, time and a half for overtime. If they are approached and hired, it’s a good day and they bring home money. If not, it is another difficult day trying to survive in this Silicon Valley economy.

But day labor was common, the norm, for the first audience that heard Jesus tell his story. They knew that survival depended on good weather and abundant crops. They worked hard for their daily bread.

In the time of Jesus’ ministry, there was a coin called the “denarius.” The meaning of the Greek word for the coin is basically translated “a day’s pay [for labor].” In the parable, in Greek, the ones paid last — remember, the ones who had worked since sunrise, were given the agreed denarius, meaning the workers had agreed to a day’s work for a day’s pay, and that is what they received. And they felt aggrieved. When they complained, the owner of the vineyard replied, “Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to these 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.”

“...or are you envious...?”

Two weeks ago Pastor Salying introduced Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire. There is something in our makeup as human beings that compels us to compare ourselves with others, to compete with others, to imitate others, and to feel envy and jealousy toward others.

Rene Girard was right about human nature. We are that way. Why do we have this innate, compulsive need to compare our lives with others?

And, what happens when we fall into that trap? Our feelings about our life shift from the well-being that comes with productive work and appropriate pay, the sense of abundance and sufficiency. That narrative can quickly change to a tale of deprivation. Abundance morphs into scarcity; well-being turns inside out and becomes grievance.

An attitude of grievance expresses often as self-righteous anger and resentment. A problem with comparison is that it plays into zero-sum thinking; meaning that we feel if the one we compare to is better off, we are worse off. If she is enjoying what appears to be good fortune, I am suffering from ill-fortune. His gain is my loss. It seems to be, after all, a dog-eat-dog world, doesn't it? This way of thinking affects us emotionally, relationally, and spiritually.

So, how do we deal with what is, after all, human nature? We can't just ball up our fists, scrunch our eyes closed and wish, wish, wish a change in attitude. It doesn't really work that way.

I think the answer to this question is no single verse in Matthew's gospel. But the answer is found there. I believe that the way we change our attitudes begins with changing our behavior. And two places to look are, first, the Lord's Prayer, and secondly, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount

In the Christian tradition there is an ancient axiom: "Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi." The literal translation of the Latin is, "The Law of Prayer; The Law of Belief." In plain English; "as we pray, so we believe."

In the Lord's Prayer, we say, "give us this day our daily bread." This prayer acknowledges our dependence on God. But what changes if we dare to work our imaginations and ponder how this prayer feels to a day laborer, for whom nothing is guaranteed. That might help us recognize that we are, all of us, equally dependent on God's goodness. And it might awaken or strengthen a calling to channel that blessing into action.

In the Sermon on the Mound, Jesus addresses our behavior head-on. What is required of us is as radical in its simplicity as it is radical in its scope: We are called to not just love our friends, but love those against whom we hold grievances. We are called to go the extra mile, give to all who beg, and surrender the desire to get even when offended.

It's a big ask. It is a lifetime of work. But taking it seriously as what Jesus meant when he invited us to take up our own crosses and follow him.

We may never get to the point where we can easily rejoice with those who receive a day's pay for an hour's labor. But we may get to the place where others' good fortune does not challenge our own sense of abundance and well-being. And we can learn to discern the difference between what we want, and what we need.

We can choose to continue the path laid out in the gospels. We can pray even for those we against whom we feel resentment. Or we can try, trusting that practice becomes habit, and habit becomes the way we live and think. And we can live, not with anger and resentment, but with gratitude and trust.

Amen