

God's Economy

Matthew 20:1-16

September 21, 2008

A company scheduled a charter to reward its top sales people. Soon after boarding the ship and inspecting their cabins, one of the sales people returned to the deck and demanded to see the Captain.

An officer asked if he could help. The salesperson said, "My friend has a much better cabin. I did as good a job as he did this past year and I want a cabin just as good as his."

The officer replied: "Sir, the cabins are identical."

"Yeah," said the salesman, "but his cabin looks out on the ocean and my cabin looks out on this old dock."¹

A few years back an African-American man had his house newly painted. Just a few days after the project was completed someone spray-painted graffiti all over it. The man couldn't believe it. He wondered who could have done it. At first he was angry and pondered the possibility that it might have been racially motivated. It was obvious that for some reason someone did not like him living in their neighborhood.

He began to inquire around and discovered that it was the work of an eleven-year-old boy and that it was nothing more than a childhood prank. The man could have made a big deal out of the situation. He pondered whether he should call the police, talk to the boy's parents or file a lawsuit.

What he decided to do was to get better acquainted with the boy. He decided instead of taking the boy and his parents to court, he would teach the boy about computers.

The local newspaper did a story about what happened. The newspaper article included a picture of the boy sitting at the computer in the man's house. The reporter asked him about the graffiti. The boy told the reporter that he was sorry for what he had done. He said that he didn't really know why he had done it.

The interview ended with the boy commenting: "Mr. Stephens and I are friends now. He has taught me computers."²

There's no question this is not the normal way such negative behavior is handled. We would normally expect the result to be the boy scrubbing off the graffiti and repainting the house. We would hope that the boy was at least grounded by his parents. The choice the man made surprises us a little. In fact, we might even be a little uncomfortable with what he chose to do. True, our hearts may be a little warmed by the outcome but we're none too sure it's a really practical way or effective way to deal with the wrong behavior of a youngster.

Jesus had a way of telling stories that surprised his audiences also. People were often a little uncomfortable when Jesus offered up the punch line of a story. We often wonder at the practicality of doing things the way Jesus suggested they could, should be done. Today's parable is perhaps one of the toughest of his stories.

Our difficulty with the text is that we forget what parables were intended to do. A parable is an attempt to compare a feature or characteristic of something known – receiving a wage for working in a field - to something unknown – the generosity of God – what believers, followers of Christ, will receive for their work and belief. The story isn't intended to teach us about what people ought to be paid for working. It's not a short course in

economics or union busting or good management. It has nothing to do with fair labor laws. Rather, it's an illustration of how radical God's grace is.

Let me paint the scene Matthew reported Jesus drawing upon. The scene took place in the marketplace of the community. The marketplace in Jesus' day was the place where people of the community kind of got together. As the crowd listened to Jesus tell the story they had in their minds a picture of children running around, playing games, calling to their friends. They could visualize shoppers squeezing the fruit, handling the goods, bartering with the merchants. They could see in their minds scribes in long robes standing in their place and being saluted by those who passed by.

Amid all the commotion they could see those gathered together hoping to find work for the day. These weren't lazy folks standing on the corner hoping no one would really need them, but people desperately in need of work – desperately in need of money to buy food for their families. This area of the marketplace was the equivalent of today's unemployment office. People went there first thing in the morning, carrying the necessary tools to work and waited until someone arrived who would hire them. Some stood in groups and talked about the events of the day before – the kind of work they were able to obtain – while others stood quietly alone waiting and contemplating their situation.

They could hear a man's loud voice interrupting the thoughts of the quiet and the chatter of friends: "The grapes are ripe! They are ready to be harvested!" The crowd could visualize the unemployed eagerly gathering around the householder in hopes of being chosen and to hear how much they would be paid.

The householder would negotiate a salary and take with him those he thought he would need. This particular day it was agreed that everyone would be paid a denarius, which was the average daily wage. So, let's say in this day and age it would be approximately \$100 for 12 hours of work. The workers were then sent off into the vineyard to begin the harvesting in the cool morning air.

The reality of the grape harvest was that it happened toward the end of September and it was followed closely by the rains. When the rains came, the harvest was over – the rest of the crop was ruined. The vineyard owner had one ear tuned to 610 AM on his radio and when he heard that frost and rain were coming that night he knew he needed more workers. So, three hours later he returned to the marketplace. While there wouldn't be as much commotion, there would still be people standing around hoping still to find work. In fact, they were so willing to work they didn't even inquire about how much they were going to earn. They seemed content with thinking that whatever it was it would be fair.

The householder returned to the marketplace two more times during the day and employed additional workers. In fact, just one hour before quitting time, perhaps hoping to maximize his profit, the householder gathered all those still remaining in the marketplace and encouraged them to work for him during that final hour.

When evening arrived, all the workers were called in from the vineyard to be paid. The vineyard owner looked with relief on the overflowing baskets of grapes ready to be taken to the winepress. He gave the foreman the stack of pay envelopes, with instructions to pay the 5:00 p.m. workers first.

When the 5:00 p.m. folks opened their envelopes they found \$100 and they were delighted. The 3:00 p.m., noon, and 9:00 a.m. workers likewise received their envelopes and were very pleased. By the time the foreman

reached the dawn workers, they had been doing some figuring and they were anticipating checks of over \$1,000 since they had been sweating in the sun all day and those who only worked one hour had received \$100.

Well, when they discovered that their envelopes only contained \$100 we're not really all that surprised to learn that they were a bit disappointed – confused – hurt - angry. They grumbled about how they'd been ripped off. They confronted the owner. The householder said to them: "Friends, didn't we agree that you'd work for \$100 today? You got your \$100. Take it and go home. I haven't cheated you. It's my money and it's my business to who is paid how much. Can't I be generous if I want to?" And then he asked: "Are you envious of my generosity?"

There's one more thing that is important to keep in mind about the setting in which Jesus told this parable. Just a little before Jesus told this parable Peter had said to Jesus: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have when this is all over?" Peter was pointing out to Jesus all that he and the others had given up in order to become his followers. Some of them had given up their homes – some of them their families – some of them their livelihoods – some of them their whole lives.

Jesus' response was this parable: "Peter, you will receive salvation, eternal life, a place in the kingdom of heaven. And," Jesus said, "so will everyone else who responds to my invitation!"

You see, the parable is in a sense a warning to the disciples. It's as if Jesus said to them, "You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian faith and fellowship very early – right at the beginning. The time will come, however, when others will come as well. You need to be careful not to claim a special honor or place because you were Christians before them. All people, no matter when they come to the faith, are equally precious and valuable to me. It's not a question of fairness, Peter. It's about being generous. It's about grace."

My friends, the warning is still true for us. This may surprise you, but there are people who think that because they have been members of a church for a long time or they give a lot of money that the church belongs to them – that they can dictate and control its policies. Such people resent what seems to them to be the intrusion of new blood into the church – the rise of a new generation who have different plans, different ways, different ideas.

Another important note for us in this passage is that if we assume we are among the laborers who began at dawn we are missing a very important point. Jesus is the one who has borne the burden of the day – the scorching heat – the burdens of our lives. None of us is worthy of the gift of eternal life. It's not something we earn. God calls us and gives the full wage not because we have worked hard enough to earn it, but because Jesus has done it for us. We do not do good works in order to obtain salvation. We do them in response to the generosity of God – in thanksgiving for Jesus' initiation – Jesus' sacrifice – on our behalf. We simply cannot be growing in the faith if our first concern is how God is going to reward us for what we do.

So, what is it we really expect out of God then? Do we think God has several different mansions in heaven for people and that which house we get assigned to depends on how long we've been a Christian or how much we gave or how often we came to church? Is that the way we really want God to decide things? And those who come to the realization that Christ is their savior at the end of their life? Why, they get to take up residence in a garage attached to one of our mansions? Is that really the kind of God we want? "Would we really want God to deal with us according to our works? To compensate us in terms of how we're living our lives?"³

Let me suggest an alternative ending to the parable. “And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward: ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages beginning with the last, up to the first.’ When those who were hired at five o’clock came, each of them received \$100. And when the rest of the laborers saw that they would all be given a day’s wage, they all cheered, thanking the landowner for his generosity. Each worker went home smiling, happy for one another and praising God.”

Now, as this week progressed I kept thinking there would be a way to relate the loss of electricity and people’s reaction to the loss to this parable. I just knew there had to be something in what we experienced that was relevant to this story. I think it might be something like this – while many of us were lucky enough never to lose our electricity and some of us were out one day and some of us were out two, three or four days and some of us are still without – I think I saw the alternative ending worked out on occasion – people with electricity and people without electricity rejoicing whenever the news of another neighborhood receiving it was announced. And there was the hoping and praying and offering active prayers of help to those without. There were so many neat things that happened this past week. Sure there were some inconveniences – but the community building – the sharing that took place I think was interesting and awesome. Yes, there were those who spent the majority of their week complaining – ignore them and instead affirm the expressions of community – the generosity people experienced instead.

The invitation to Christian discipleship this morning is an invitation to sense ourselves as agents of grace on God’s behalf. Imagine yourself for a moment, not among the workers in the vineyard, but as one chosen to dispense the envelopes with the wages in them. Spend some time looking into the eyes of those first workers as they received their envelopes. Wouldn’t you like to bring that kind of joy into someone’s life? I’ll take God’s economy – God’s generosity any day!

Let’s pray: O Lord, we think we understand the point of your story and we are so thankful for your grace when it comes to allowing us to be apart of eternal life. We are still bothered by this grace offered so freely to others who haven’t sacrificed and worked on your behalf all their days. Help us, Lord, to overcome our resistance, our uncomfortableness. Turn us on again to forgetting our privilege and rejoicing in the awakening of new life in others. Set a burning desire within us, Lord, to share the good news with all those in need of your message of salvation. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

1. King Duncan, “Playing the Comparison Game,” Collected Sermons: Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
2. King Duncan, “Grace Greater Than Our Sin,” Collected Sermons: Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
3. Homiletics, September – October, 2008, p. 25.