

Proper 20A
September 18, 2011
The Rev. Dr. William Seth Adams
Matthew 20.1-16

Blessed be the Name of God

The parable that Matthew gives us this morning shows Jesus at his very best, telling a story that leads into a proper puzzle, overturning conventional expectations, frustrating any social logic and ending with a very snappy saying! How lovely!

This story is unique to Matthew's gospel and its length and detail suggest that Matthew really enjoyed passing this episode along. You'll remember other parables and stories we've looked at over the last little while, many beginning as this one does, "The kingdom of heaven is like..." These other stories are typically short and cryptic but this one is full-grown, though in its way, no less cryptic. But we'll get to that in a bit.

First, let me remind you something you already know. The "kingdom of heaven," "the kingdom of God," these are not spatial or geographical references. These do not refer to a place but rather a circumstance, a set of conditions or expectations. The "kingdom" in question is a "when" not a "where." That means we could begin any of these stories or parables by saying, "When God reigns it will be like this..." or "The reign of God will be like such and such..." and so on.

Now having offered that reminder, let's move to Matthew's story. People go to the Bible for all sorts of reasons, seeking all sorts of insight and "answers." If one were to go to this morning's parable seeking to learn about Jesus' grasp of good business practices, for example, that search would obviously lead to quite unsettling results. The seeker would learn very quickly not to ask, in a business context, "what would Jesus do?" Same would be true for matters of labor relations and workers' compensation, as our story makes more than clear.

Five times the landowner went out to hire laborers—early, then at nine, then at noon, then at three and then at five. "...go to my vineyard," he said, promising each laborer a proper wage. This he said on each occasion, and to each of those he hired. When days' end came, beginning with those hired last, the landowner paid to each what he had promised. The landowner kept his word. But all was not well, particularly with

those who had worked a full day. They grumbled, “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.”

Amicably, the landowner replied, “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?”

The workers who were hired first appealed to common sense, fair play, logic and reason. Their complaint is not necessarily that the last hired received what they did, but rather that if the householder was that generous with the last, then certainly he might provide them with a “bonus” for having endured the heat of the day. Clearly, they did have a legitimate complaint from the rational and logical perspective. However, this parable is not a paradigm of fair labor management, but rather is a statement about the radical nature of God and God’s reign.

The more I thought about this parable, the more clear I became about the fact that our story teaches us that the reign of God is just, but not necessarily fair. “Fair” would mean that we were each measured somehow and rewarded appropriately to that measure. “Fair” is a term for human interrelationships. “Just” is a term about the way the landowner promised to act, a promise that was kept.

One point the story makes more than clearly is that the landowner’s generosity had to do with the landowner’s promise, and not with the value or duration of the work done by those he hired. That is, none of them merited or earned anything by the quality or duration of what they did in the vineyard. What they received, they received in equal measure because of the owner’s promise.

This is grace, freely given, unearned. Deeply ingrained patterns of human behavior and experience simply resist the seemingly preposterous nature of grace as an expression of the sovereign love of God. Things simply get turned back to front, or upside down.

So we have a story about workers who worked varying lengths of time and were treated the same, each given the same amount of “grace,” if you will. There is an example of this phenomenon that will occur right here in this room in a very few minutes.

Very soon, we will pray over bread and wine and then we will all be invited to receive communion. Notice firstly that we are a group of diverse folks, people faithful in varying degrees, energetic in the Christian life in varying degrees, members of this or any other church for varying lengths of time. Notice that diversity, notice those differences.

Then notice what will happen. Everyone will be invited to the table. Everyone will be given something to eat and drink. Everyone will receive in like measure. Everyone is welcome. No one will be turned away. No one will go hungry.

If you have eyes to see, you will witness a small glimpse of the Reign of God, right here in this room. By means of bread and wine, the generosity of God will be acted out, acted out just as it was foretold in our parable. We are not given whatever it is that we deserve, whatever would be “fair.” Our merit is not the issue. The issue is God’s generosity, God’s willingness to take us as we are, and give us grace.

This is what is so hard to grasp. This grace is freely given, unmerited, unearned. It is completely contrary to our human social formation; it is foreign to our grasp of things, alien. But there it is, nonetheless. According to our nature, we are rewarded because of our value. In the economy of God, we are of value because we are rewarded. We work hard for the accomplishment of Godly ends because we are given grace unbounded.

The other St. Augustine taught us about what he called prevenient grace, the grace that goes before us, the grace that meets us when we get there. In the collect that we will pray early next month, we read, “Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...” [Proper 23] The earlier rendition of this collect, the form of it that some of us grew up with, read “Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works...” [1928 BCP, 17th Sunday after Trinity] Prevenient grace, the grace that awaits us and meets us, the grace without which we cannot do much of anything at all.

Last week, after our one service of the day, our parish hall was filled with tables and signs and people. What was in evidence was the good work that so characterizes this parish, prompted and sustained by the grace of God; ministries and callings of all sorts and kinds in full expression, testifying to the rich presence in this

place of the grace of God. Another small glimpse of the Reign of God. You are the bearers of this grace and the agents of the Reign of God.

When I began just a bit ago, I rather rudely said that our parable today ended with “a very snappy saying.” What I meant by that was that we have yet another of those tight sayings, pithy sayings, that Jesus offers to resolve and gather up particular a teaching. “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” What does that mean? Well, in the story, of course, it meant that the workers who came to the vineyard last were paid first, and those who came first were paid last. But remember, they were all paid the same. They were paid what was promised. In this sense, the playing field was leveled, measures of value were suppressed or set aside. First or last, last or first, of no matter.

Many years ago, in my first years out of seminary, I served three small congregations in northeast Missouri, north of Hannibal along the Mississippi River. I remember this text being read one Sunday morning at St. Paul’s Church, Palmyra, where I was the vicar. I don’t remember my preaching that day or much else about the service, except that I can still picture myself standing in the entryway of the building, after church, talking with a parishioner. She must have said something about this last line—the last will be first and the first last. She thought it was odd or some such.

It’s uncommon in my experience for me to be able to think of the right thing to say at the right time to say it, but that morning I was provided with a moment of insight, grace we might call it. “The last will be first and the first will be last.” I thought for a moment and said, “It’s a circle, don’t you see. That geometrical figure without beginning or end, so first and last are always the same, indistinguishable.” I’m still grateful for that insight. And I’m still persuaded of the virtue of that image, the circle, as the figure consonant with Jesus’ meaning.

Last Wednesday, we celebrated the Feast of the Holy Cross. In the homily that morning, the preacher suggested that our faith was in the shape of a cross, that whatever else we believe, the cross is at the heart and center of that faithful believing. The shape of Christian faith is the shape of the cross. I am persuaded.

At the same time, I am also persuaded that the shape of the Christian community is a circle, a figure without beginning or end, without hierarchy, a figure that can be

enlarge without end to include and welcome any and all. The circle, it is the shape of grace.

For Amy and me, today concludes our three months of interim service. Our rector will be in this place next Sunday. For us, for the next three Sundays, I will be teaching at Epiphany Parish in Seattle and, because God is good, Amy will travel with me. So, for those three Sundays we will be there, not here. But come mid-October, we'll be back here where we belong, sitting amongst you very happily.

Though we sit here in these rows, I am more than able to see the circle of grace that envelops us here, all of us, grace that meets us along the way and sustains us in our going. Unmerited, unearned yet lavishly poured out.

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