

**Pentecost 19 - Year A
21 September 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri**

Matthew 20:1-16

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

As you know, parables – such as the one we heard today - were brief, well-crafted stories that Jesus used to teach some truth about how God works in the world. The elements of these stories were things that would have been common to the everyday life of Palestinian peasants in the first century. Things that people in that time and culture could relate to. For example, in this parable – people working in a vineyard.

But, while the elements of these stories were common, the endings of these stories were anything but common. They were surprising, shocking, even offensive to those who heard them.

Jesus' audience for this parable was his disciples. Those who were closest to him, those who already had made some commitment to follow him.

The writer of Matthew's gospel has placed the parable between two interesting conversations. The first conversation, the one preceding this parable, was between Jesus and Peter. A conversation that began when Peter asked Jesus about what the disciples could expect as payment for following Jesus. Peter started the conversation this way.

“Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?”

One thing is for sure - you'll never hear the name Peter and the adjective subtle used in the same sentence. But, Peter just wanted to know what Jesus thought was fair payment for all that he and his friends had given up.

And, the conversation that comes after this parable - well, it's about a sort of payment, too. The mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked if her sons could have positions of honor, one on the right side of Jesus and one of the left side, when he came into his kingdom.

I imagine she didn't think this request was out of line, although the other disciples surely did when they heard the question. I imagine she didn't think this request was any more out of line than Peter had thought his question was out of line.

You know her boys had given up a lot to follow Jesus. She and their dad had given up a lot, too, when their boys left the family fishing business to follow this itinerant preacher and miracle worker. Surely, they could expect some payment. That was fair.

And, in the middle of these two conversations, we have the parable we've read today. A parable that seems to be all about fair payment.

It was harvest time and one morning about daybreak, the owner of a vineyard went into town, down to the local place where day-laborers hung out waiting for potential employers to hire them.

These day-laborers had no particular skills or education. They were people who could lift and carry, strain and sweat, and do hard physical labor. If they could have found any other work, they wouldn't have been waiting there where the vineyard owner found them that morning.

At that early hour, the vineyard owner hired a few workers, promising to pay them the usual wage for day-laborers - a denarius, just enough for a worker to provide a subsistence level of existence for his family and himself.

At mid-morning, the owner of the vineyard came back into town and hired a few more workers, promising to pay them what was right. Same thing at mid-day; same thing at mid-afternoon.

Then, finally, almost at the end of the workday, the vineyard owner came back and found a few workers still waiting for someone to hire them. Jesus didn't tell us why these folks hadn't been hired earlier.

Maybe they were too young or too old to do hard harvest work out in the noonday sun. Maybe they didn't look very healthy or able-bodied. Maybe they hadn't really been very interested in getting hired. Or maybe they looked a little unsavory. Not the kind of folks that an upstanding vineyard owner would want working for him.

But, whatever the reason was that they were still there waiting to be hired just an hour before the end of the workday, the vineyard owner, said, "Come on, you can work in my vineyard." And, so they went.

Now, the end of the day came. The time for payments to be made and the workers to go home to their families.

The vineyard owner said to his manager, "Line them up. Put the people who came last at the head of the line and the people who came early this morning at the end of the line and everyone else on between according to the time they started to work."

So, they all lined up, and the payment process began. The group that had worked only one hour was paid first. They were given a denarius. A usual day's wage.

Now, can't you imagine how excited everybody else in the line got when they saw this? They had to be expecting even more, since they had worked longer. And, those folks at the very end of the line. They'd been working all day – from sun up to sun down. It must have seemed like all that hard work was really going to pay off. If people who had worked one hour got a denarius, well, they'd probably get way more than that.

But, you heard the parable. Everyone in the line got the same payment. A denarius. Enough to feed a family for a day. Daily bread. No more.

And, the vineyard owner did it right out in the open. He didn't even try to hide what he was doing. Surely, if he had paid those hired early in the day first, they would have been on their way home by the time he got to the workers hired late in the day. No one would have been the wiser.

Not fair! Not fair! Not fair!

And, to this the vineyard owner said, "I kept my word. I gave you what we agreed on. Are you telling me how I should pay the people I put to work? Can't I be generous, if I want to be generous?"

Imagine if you were hearing this story for the first time. Is that the ending you'd expect? Some parables that Jesus told in first-century Palestine need a little translation for our twenty-first century American ears. But, not this one. First-century Palestine. 2008 in Lee's Summit, Missouri.

We get it. And, honestly, most of us can relate to those folks who worked all day in the hot sun doing hard physical labor. We can feel the perceived injustice they must have felt.

Not fair! Not fair! Not fair!

But, wait a minute, just how did the vineyard owner show his generosity?

Was it that he paid a handsome sum of money to anyone? No, not really. He paid the usual day's wage. He gave each worker what was needed for them to live. Now, the vineyard owner

was rich. He no doubt could have paid all of them more if he had really wanted to be generous in that way.

To be perfectly honest, the vineyard owner was generous in terms of the amount of payment only to some of the workers, especially to those who came later in the day. But, he certainly wasn't generous to all of them. Not in terms of how much he paid them.

So, how did the vineyard owner show his generosity?

I think the owner's generosity was shown not in how much each was paid but in his invitation to join in the work of his vineyard in the first place. An invitation that was made over and over again, to those who signed up right away and to those who took a little more time and a little more persuading to hear it. An invitation that was made to those who were left even at the end of the day, those who no one else seemed to think were worth hiring.

You see we tend to think this parable is about us, and we identify with the workers. And, when it's about the workers (us), then we get all hung up in the fairness or the unfairness of what was paid to the workers (us). Maybe we are too much like Peter and the mother of James and John looking for fair payment in return for all we perceive we have given up and all we have done.

But, remember the parables of Jesus aren't about us; they are about God and how God works in the world. If God is symbolized by the vineyard owner in this parable, then what's the focus?

What's the truth that Jesus is trying to teach?

Well, I think the focus is the almost incessant activity of the vineyard owner, going back and forth, back and forth, to hire more workers time after time after time, until the day is almost spent. This vineyard owner just seemed hell-bent on getting everyone he could find into his vineyard to share the work of the harvest.

The truth is that God is not interested in hiring only the best and brightest workers. God's focus is not on making sure the people working in the vineyard all have perfect employment records and bright prospects. God will even send workers into the vineyard if they didn't seem very interested in the invitation to work at first or even if they said "no" the first time.

No, God takes anyone who will work in the vineyard. Come early in the day, come late in the day, come sometime in between. God wants everyone to find work in the vineyard. And, there's plenty of work to go around in God's vineyard.

God is persistent, relentless in looking for those who will go into the vineyard and share in the work of the harvest. So, persistent and relentless that God won't stop inviting people to join the work crew, even if it's almost sundown.

It's not about the payment and whether it looks fair or not. The kingdom of heaven, God's kingdom, it's all about being able to share in the work. The work of reconciling people to God and to each other. And, that's important and deeply meaningful work. The most important, the most meaningful work. The persistent, relentless invitation to do that sort of work – now that's real generosity. What could possibly be more fair?

Today, this generous God, the one symbolized by the vineyard owner, is still looking for workers to go into his vineyard. God calls out to those who are waiting to find work, to find meaning in their lives, "Come, go to work in my vineyard. What, you want to know how much I will pay? Well, that's not the point; don't worry about that. You'll have what's fair - all you need to do the work I give you to do. What's important is that you'll find a life that means something. A life that is worth living. Come on, accept my invitation, work in my vineyard."

AMEN.