

On Homecoming Sunday, September 18, 2011, Pastor Joel preached the following sermon entitled, "The Just and Generous Employer", based on the parable from Matthew 20:1-16. On this day we also recognized some of our long-time members and took in five new members to First Church. It was a wonderful day!

Ever since that first day Jesus told this parable, those who have heard it have been surprised, confused, taken aback, and even angered or offended by what they perceive to be its message. It certainly makes us question our senses of fairness and of what is right, or just. And it makes us wonder perhaps, what kind of God it is that Jesus is talking about anyway. Could it be, that our God, that supreme essence of the universe that we worship as the basis for all that is right and good and just, the origin of how we have come to discern what is right and wrong, good and bad, fair and unfair, could this God really be like the employer in Jesus' parable?

Like many of Jesus' other parables, the Prodigal Son story comes immediately to mind, this parable of "*the laborers in the vineyard*" or also possibly named, "*the generous employer*", makes us think and wonder about who our God, the God of Jesus, really is, as well as making us consider again our own moral and ethical standards by which we live.

The parable begins believably enough. It reflects quite accurately what a man who owned a vineyard in that day would do to hire workers. And when the grapes are ripe, needing to be harvested as quickly as possible, it is understandable that the vineyard owner might indeed go into the marketplace to look for more workers throughout the day, even at noon or 3:00 pm. But we start to wonder about him when he even hires some men when there is only 1 hour left in the day to work.

Of course, the strangest part of the story lies in the time when the workers get paid. Everyone would agree with those first hired workers that they deserve more than those hired at the close of the day. As one of them argues, "*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.*" And those of us who have worked in places where others have found ways to avoid

doing their fair share of the work, might relate to their consternation about the way the employer rewards his workers.

But remember, this is a parable, it is allegorical. Its' meaning is supposed to point to something other than what it is actually portraying. Jesus was not teaching about owner/labor relations, although what he taught as the Kingdom of God has direct implications on such things. Jesus was teaching his disciples, what the Kingdom of God is like.

Throughout history, this parable has been interpreted in different ways. The workers who are hired at different times are seen to represent different groups. It is easy to see Jesus suggesting that the first ones hired represent the religious elite, the Pharisees and Sadducees of his day who felt they had earned God's favor which put them above others, especially the outcast of their society, the sick, the poor, the prostitutes, who may be those represented by the last hired.

Early church theologians saw those hired as the generations of Israel, such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and in the last hour Gentiles. Matthew, the author of this gospel, may have been thinking of the first hired as Jesus first disciples, the apostles and other Jewish followers of Jesus and the last hired as new Gentile converts to his congregation, there in the late first century.

And another way to interpret this parable, has to do with individual merit, or earning one's way into the Kingdom. The old question of faith vs. works.

Kathryn D. Blanchard, in the commentary *Feasting on the Word*, writes, "*Hard-working, "good" people have always asked: what kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not? The tradition has consistently answered: a just God. For this to be true, however, the workers must recognize the opportunity to work in the vineyard (whether it*

represents Israel, individual virtue, the church, or the cause of justice in the world) as a gift in itself. There is no room for human pride, since one's only choice is either to answer the call to work in God's kingdom, or to stand idle and waste one's life altogether. God does not will that anyone's life should be wasted, so God extends the invitation indiscriminately and repeatedly, in order to gather as many as possible into the vineyard. God shows no partiality among persons (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34); all are equally deserving - or undeserving - of the opportunity to work, so the reward for all workers is equal as well."

What I like here is that idea that the workers must see the *"opportunity to work in the vineyard . . . as a gift in itself."* If we are only seeking to enter the Kingdom of God, to get some reward, to ensure a place in heaven, or to gain some kind of earthly riches for ourselves as espoused by the Prosperity Gospel, then we are missing Jesus' whole point here. In fact, the gain is not in the pay of the daily wages, as important as that is (remember Jesus' prayer that includes the petition to God to *"Give us this day our daily bread"*?), but our true gain is merely being in the vineyard, also known as the Kingdom of God, or the presence or realm of God all around us!

When I was in seminary, I spent a summer doing CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) in a hospital in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was assigned to the cancer ward and while there, had a request from an old woman who was dying of cancer. She wanted to ask me about something her pastor had told her. She was very upset because she had always been a good Christian, obeyed all the rules and guidelines of the church as a girl (no dancing, drinking, smoking, etc) and felt secure that she was going to heaven. But a friend of hers, a woman she grew up with, who did not obey all the rules as a girl or throughout most of her life, who was, she said, a "fluzy" had in her last days sought out Christ and the Church, and this old woman's pastor told her that yes, indeed, she too would be welcomed into heaven, even after the loose life she had led. I tried to explain to her, that like her pastor, I too believed that her friend would be welcomed by

God in heaven, that God's grace makes it possible for all to find acceptance and love within God's care and that instead of being angry or jealous, she should be happy for her friend. She couldn't believe it! She just couldn't believe it.

Finding our place, our work in the vineyard, in the realm of God in our midst, that is our true reward. And we do experience that right here in church! When we come together on Sunday mornings or any time we gather for worship or prayer, we enter the vineyard together. Whenever we engage in the work and mission of the church, fighting injustice, helping the poor and hungry, attending to the needs of the sick or the lonely, bringing joy and hope to the hopeless and disenchanted. When we do these things, we receive a reward that comes directly from God. We are blessed with a warmth of heart, with a knowledge that Christ abides right here with us, working right alongside us. And deep inside, we own a confidence that God is alive and is indeed a just and generous God, whose love and compassion we have come to know well. A love and compassion that we come to reflect through our own lives.

So, on this day, this Homecoming Sunday, take heart you new members! Those who have been here for 30, 40, 50 or more years, they have nothing on you in the eyes of God. Nor do they harbor any jealousy or angst against you, for that is not their nature. No, and nor do you have to worry about us professional religious types. We don't get any kind of spiritual bonuses or overtime pay. No, in the Kin-dom of God, we all work together for a generous and righteous employer. And the best and truest response any of us who have been working long hours in the vineyard can have, is to say, *"Thank God! Another worker has come to be with us in this vineyard! We're so glad you're here! Welcome home!"*

More of our pastor's sermons can be found on our website: www.firstchurchinbelfast.org

