

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

For just a moment ask yourself, “What was my initial reaction to hearing the Gospel as it was read this morning?” How does this owner’s attitude sound in your world and way of operating? It is hard to reconcile this text with a wage based economy or the belief that life is or ought to be, quid pro quo.

Can you imagine a Human Resources manager trying something like this? A few years ago at Twin Lakes we reworked all the evaluation instruments to make them more focused on giving accurate feedback to people in particular jobs. With 340 employees it was important to give people prior notice that “things will be different this year”. The HR Officer explained carefully that the annual reviews would have very different numbers from previous years and they would be lower since the scales had been altered; THEREFORE, “Don’t be troubled by a lesser numerical score, because it doesn’t mean you have done a lesser job. It is simply due to an overall lower system. You will no doubt guess what is coming! The door to the office bangs with people wanting to discuss their scores. One individual was absolutely beside herself that her assessment was lower than last year. Finally in frustration she blurted out, “I don’t give a d... about the tool you used; THIS IS NOT FAIR”, even with the very good raise she achieved!

We, of course, can chuckle at stories like this because we stand at a distance from them where they are not yet personal, and we can see the foibles and frailties of others more readily from that standpoint. The concern of the employee is not far at all from the workers in the vineyard from the text this morning. They have come to work ALL day in the heat for a certain return, and when they get to the owner of the vineyard for their pay they find those who have come in the cool of the very late afternoon are getting the same coinage they are receiving. What troubles the laborers is that this seems to work in a way that ignores or stands outside their sense of justice or at least fairness. I wonder; do they give voice to what concerns us, too?

We hear today the core of the Gospel imbedded in this remarkable parable, “**Am I not free to do as I wish with what is mine?**” (And then in the very next phrase to make the message more potent, the Greek is very strong for literally translated it says, “Is your eye evil because of my generosity?” Are you jealous because I have treated others with the same care I give you?) I have to tell you that I laughed last Monday evening as I first read the parable. In a day of equal opportunity employment, worker’s rights, and a jungle of federal regulations, I could not help but wonder what would happen to the owner of the vineyard today!! Can you say “uprising”.

The parable does do something to us, doesn’t it? If you put yourself in the place of those who have struggled all day among grapes, or in our context, all their lives to be good, honest, kind, truthful, and faithful people, what does the punch line of this text bring out in you? I must confess to you that I respond very differently if I am the one receiving equal treatment for disproportionate effort compared to those whose struggles have been far greater. How many of us here who have been around children, adolescents, or even some adults have **not** heard that phrase, “but that isn’t fair”, when confronting life’s mysterious challenges and rewards? There does seem to be ingrained in our psyches a resistance to injustice towards ourselves, and a naïve expectation that life at least

should be fair, even if it is not. And for those in our midst who have had a share in tragedy and loss that sense may be even more keen and sharp. Jesus’ own words that his Father causes it to rain on both the just and unjust is certainly true, but do we not really from time to time wish that it was otherwise? There are few of us who would not admit to occasionally wishing that a troublesome soul would their just rewards. But there is more than merely justice at stake here; Go step beyond and ask if you and I are equally offended if others receive less, or does envy empty our joy when another is fortunate? This Gospel confronts us with one of the nagging problems within the Christian life; how do we deal with the imbalance and often skewed things that come our way on the one hand, while having faith in God on the other? And in ways that we may find embarrassing, it shows how we cling to our world’s definition of fairness and justice.

The real and lasting Word of God in the parable is that it brings us face to face with another world. It is one that lies just beneath the surface of everyday life and yet is constantly at work in our midst. It is the world as seen and treated through the grace and mercy of God. One of the great affronts to us is to learn that we are not the center of the universe, or even our own neighborhood. A second challenge is found in God’s unfathomable ways which sometimes seem to us almost as nonsense. Who among us would choose to be present to each other in bread and wine? What person in our midst would want to be loved and yet remain hidden from the eyes of the beloved? What parent here would select to give the world hope by sacrificing a son or daughter for those who treat them as if they did not exist? This may seem nonsense, but it is the world and work of the Father, the keeper of the Great Vineyard. Our parable this morning brings us face to face with the very nature of God, the one to whom we turn daily in prayer. It interjects into consciousness, thought, and soul a new reality which is the deepest, gentlest, and yet most powerful of God’s traits; His Grace. Sometimes fairness does not enter into the ways of God. There is an inherent unfairness in the notion of Grace, because it goes beyond trying to find a balance between what we deserve on the one hand and what we are freely given on the other.

When you read or hear this parable what comes to mind? Do you consider the point of view of those “hard-working” souls? Or do you think, “Ah, those late comers are lucky stiff?” I would like to ask you to reflect on the owner of the vineyard, and his character. What is at the heart of his action? Is it to prove a point to the overly conscientious, or to toss a bone to the late comers? Neither. (By the way, the latecomers were not lazy or hanging around to gossip—they waited all day for hope of employment and bread that would purchase.) Maybe it is to show that at the heart and soul of life is a generosity that goes far beyond what we can either imagine or than we deserve. For the Christian this unearned credit is Grace. *It is the decisive action of God in overcoming for us our bondage to sin and death, which we could not possibly have done for ourselves.* No amount of self-effort can achieve it. To attempt that will only lead to despair. Instead God grants it out His very being, embodies it in Jesus of Nazareth, gives it to us in the Eucharist as a palpable presence, and lives it out in the life of His Body, the Church.

Once that gift is given and received it creates a new person, and a new situation for us. We are no longer bound by our past, whatever may be lurking in there. And even though it may reach out from time to time to pull us back, God’s choice in the matter has been made. His liberality, which is merely a by-product of His love for us is how He has chosen to treat us. The parable challenges us also. It asks us to see if we can have joy over the grace given to others that we have for that which is poured out on us. Perhaps this is a measure of how deeply we are grateful for what God

has done for us. What is it worth to you and me to know that God loves us enough to see past our brokenness and to envision and create what we can be?

William Sloane Coffin tells about an encounter he had as a seminary student living and working in East Harlem. “I tried on day in my youthful eagerness to talk a bookie out of his chosen vocation. He listened, I must say, very patiently”, and then said, “Son, one of these days you’re going to be a preacher, aren’t you?” I said, “YES!” Bookie—“You believe in grace then, don’t you?” I said, “Yes, why?” “I’ll tell you why son. You believe in grace and I believe in gambling, and that means both of us believe life is good, when it is something for nothing!” The bookie was wrong about gambling because it creates losers, but he was right about Grace, at least from our side of the equation. God simply selects to be true to Himself even in the face of our shortcomings and sin. We live in a world that upholds merit, and if we try to take that into God’s world we will find estrangement. But in the world governed by Grace we are connected by His great gifts.

Jesus has, at days’ end, chosen to remember his love for you. That is what we call Grace. In truth God simply makes the choice to remember our sin no more. (Isa. 43: 25) The reality that God is free to give us what He knows we need, not what we deserve. Am I not free to do what I will with what belongs to me? That includes us for we are His. Amen.+