

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

Every time this Gospel comes up for our Sunday Mass, I vacillate between wringing my hands in one moment and laughing out loud the next. The hand wringing is no doubt rooted in the anxiety of puzzling over what new can be said about this text, and not wanting to trivialize it. The laughter is derived from having been a healthcare administrator with a vast ocean of employees, who if I had managed their hourly pay in the manner of the master of the vineyard would have hung me effigy or, had ‘wage and hour’ officials come and swoop down like vultures on roadkill!

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 and therefore somehow fair and will in the end the balance sheet will, well, balance. Modern employment practice doesn’t provide a good paradigm here.

I suspect many of you have heard a variety of interpretations of St. Matthew’s account of the parable. The most frequent, at least in evangelical circles, is the parable tells us that last minute conversions to belief in Jesus are treated with the same acceptance as those who have struggled with the faith over a lifetime. And I suppose that is true enough. Other readings cast it as a warning about judging our compatriots on the output and measure of what they bring to the community, and those elements can be found here also. There is a strand of thought that pushes away from a spiritual reading and suggests that this really is about economics, wages, and proposes that Jesus believed in a kind of egalitarian society where being ‘fair’ becomes equivalent to grace. While I think that is a stretch, there is no doubt that Jesus valued the poor as much as the wealthy. And it has even been suggested that the late comers were especially fortunate since they had been lazy or ‘idle’, but the word idle here means they had not been offered labor.

St. Augustine interprets the parable with a bit of allegory. He says the harvest of grapes is about a spiritual harvest at which God will rejoice in the fruits of his labor, meaning us. And he suggests the denarius stands for eternal life in which all have the same share. What is perhaps his deepest insight is that the issue of hours is meant to reflect the opportunity each person has to use their labors well, but all receive the graciousness of God at the same moment, and not commensurate to how long they/we have waited in hope. It is only that hope is fulfilled and fullness of life delivered that ultimately matters. I think he is suggesting that to take what is temporal, and even at times a touch trivial, and make that of supreme significance is to place the creation above the Creator. The outcome is rarely good, and almost never gracious.

Most of you are aware that for a number of years I served as a healthcare/hospital administrator. If you want to know about an exercise in keeping score, that work would be a good first stop in your exploration. We tracked every, yes every single dose of medicine that was administered, and knew if any ‘med errors’ occurred. Each day the direct care staff was required to fill in forms about any care that was provided, the time of day, the actions taken, and the results that followed. We had a computerized system that recorded the elapsed time from the engaging of a call bell to the point staff responded. And every staff member had a list of tasks to be accomplished and recorded for every day, shift, and hallway in the building. Those folks could tell you about who came in late, who was slack. It was a pristine version of ‘keeping score’. The real question that could not be answered or found within the scorecard was this, was true care and charity given without regard to the day, the time, or the status of the person in need? And second, what was the true value of the care rendered and the person providing it? Scorecards don’t always reveal values!

The simple fact is all of us, whether children or adults, workers or supervisors, the well-to-do or the needy have a way of keeping score. We have an inherent drive to see that things are fair, especially for ourselves. It is striking that in this parable the first words from those who worked all day is, “These last have worked but one hour, but you have made them equal to us.” In a community, an organization, a society, or a country there is hidden in unspoken words the belief that life ought to be more fair, or at the very least I should never have to tolerate another getting what I consider to be too much. The challenge is that in the Kingdom of God the rules by which we cipher fairness and just dues do not apply. That may be a good thing.

I have wondered about a silent place in this parable. The focus is between the owner of the vineyard and the long-laboring workers. But it would be valuable to hear how those ‘one-hour pickers’ responded. We don’t hear from them. Do you think they walked away saying things like, “Man, what an assignment; we need to line up tomorrow around 3:00 and see if we can pull this off again! Keep my place in line if I’m late.” The early bird gets to squirm! Or what if they realized the startling gift of a wage that allowed them several days of food which would have eluded them without the generosity of the owner? Might they have gone away sensing how those who had given long hours felt and sensing the inherent unfairness in their undeserved fortune? How do we live with the realization that we have been given and rewarded in ways not equal to our attitudes or actions, but unequally due to the great Grace in the heart of God?

What do you make of this parable-this story tossed out alongside life, which what the word means? In keeping with the belief that our Lord told parables (riddles) in order to force his hearers to consider life in a new way, the way of the Kingdom, let us explore another avenue. What if, the parable is really telling us that all the issue of hours and wages and fairness and laboring and self-assuredness are ultimately a first rung on the ladder? What if ancient and contemporary hearers were meant to be stunned by the question, “Am I not free to do what I want with...**what is mine?**” What if the real revelation here is that our temporary holding of the material of this world is actually a question of our stewarding what belongs and is owned by God? And what if the fairness of this world is in contradiction to the fairness of God and thus a poor measure of the value and meaning of life? I fear that too often I settle for a set of scales that weighs life inaccurately. I look for my worth in hours worked, praise given, accomplishments checked off, and just enough competition that when it is completed, I have come out ahead. At that point I have fallen prey to a way of being in this world that is weighed out by temporal fairness but has little to do with the one I call Father. The problem with measuring life in this way is what is missing. GRACE. I miss that I am not self-sufficient, which is a wonderfully heady and enticing fallacy. I miss that I do not have the capacity to do everything right, and therefore lose that in the imperfections God may be unfolding possibilities I cannot see ahead of time. I miss the fact that there is an inherent unfairness in Grace. But what might our lives be like if God really gave us what we deserve rather than what he chooses to do with is what His? And that is His is his all-benevolent mercy.

William Sloane Coffin wrote 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 in order that someone else can win, 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 expect God’s work that way, 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

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what He knows we need, not what we deserve. Am I not free to do what I will with what belongs to me? I suspect that is Good News. Amen+