

“Fairness”

Texts: Exodus 16:2-15

Philippians 1:21-30 (Series A, 16th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 105, 1-6, 37-45

Matthew 20:1-16

Bless Thou, the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts that they be of profit to us and acceptable to thee, oh our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The parable we heard today is titled - in most Bibles the Parable of *Workers* in the *Vineyard*. I want to suggest to you that it could have a different title, that it could equally well be called - *the Parable of the Generous Landlord*.

Whatever one calls this parable, however, it is for many of us one of the few parables in the Bible that still has the power to disturb us our sense of justice, even to anger us. Something about this parable offends many people and if you think about it with me for a minute or two you can see why.

Jesus tell his disciples that the kingdom of heaven is like a landlord who hires help at various times through the day -

- ❖ so that some work twelve hours,
- ❖ some nine,
- ❖ some six,
- ❖ and some - the last ones hired - work for only one hour.

So far so good, a normal situation that we can all relate to -but what follows next is, according to some people, not quite as good. What happens next is that at the end of the day when the boss pays off his workers, those he hired last receive a whole day's pay. And what happens after that according to many people doesn't seem quite fair, what happens is that those who worked all day long in the heat of the sun only get a day's pay.

Is it fair? Many people do not think so. Certainly the workers who slaved all day in the heat do not think so, and they grumble and then complain to the landlord "these men who were hired last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day" It is an interesting point.

Has something like this ever happened to you? Has it ever happened that you have had to work hard to get something - and then some Johnny-come-lately breezes in and gets the same thing without sweat?

It is an upsetting parable to say the least - especially if you look at it from the point of view of someone who believes that those who work harder and longer deserve more than those who work for less time and without as much difficulty.

The problem that these people have however is precisely that: They look at the parable - in fact they look at life - from a point of view that is simply not God's point of view. Before going on let us remember that the workers who were hired in the morning received everything that was due to them for their labour.

They contracted to do a day's work for a day's wage. That is the primary fact we need to remember. But we might also remember that those workers who were hired first had a great privilege:

- they knew from the very beginning of the day that they had work
- and they knew that they would be paid fairly for it.

Now, let us look at the parable from the point of view of those hired last. All day they stood around in the unemployment line landlords came and went, but they were not hired. At home they had family and nothing to feed them with, hope disappeared for them as the sun cut its course across the sky.

They longed to be in the fields under that hot sun working for someone and at the end of the day being paid a wage which would feed and cloth their family. And finally, just as their last hope is about to set with the sun someone comes along and hires them, and tells them that they will receive whatever is fair.

And they go, and they work with the hope of bringing home something, a small portion of a day's wage, enough - maybe - to survive another day and maybe not. It's tough my friends, being an outsider, being one who has no hope - or very little hope. I'm not talking here about unemployment, I'm talking about no hope, or very little at the best. And so, you can imagine just how those hired last felt when the time to be paid came.

They didn't feel very good at all, they knew they were going to get something but
- would it be enough to go around?

- would it be enough to feed their wife and their children?

Who might have to go without? Who could afford to eat less? But then - the landlord does something completely crazy, completely wild, completely unexpected, completely and totally generous something beyond their wildest dreams...

- ❖ He gives them a full day's wage
- ❖ He gives them a full day's wage even though they haven't earned it
- ❖ He gives them enough to live on,
- ❖ He gives them their families, their homes, their very lives.

That's incredible isn't it. But that is what happened. And my friends, that is what the kingdom of heaven is like. So, what is really the problem with the parable?

Why are some people so unhappy with it? Why do the workers who worked all day grumble and complain? I think it is because they have forgotten just how blessed they are?

They are so used to the certainty of their salvation so used to being part of God's work and being guaranteed their reward that they can no longer remember or imagine what being outside is like. What being without God is like. They have forgotten, and they began to complain, and their complaints are based on comparisons:

- ❖ I've worked harder,
- ❖ I've been here longer,
- ❖ I've done more. I had to go through this - so should you.
- ❖ All sense of their own blessedness disappears.

How sad it is. But praise God my friends, praise God because the kingdom of God does not work that way. The kingdom of God works on the basis of God's love and not on the basis of what we deserve.

I believe that if the people who are now working in the vineyard, would only remember how blessed they are, they would stop grumbling and complaining about other people. What I am saying is that we all need to refresh our thinking about life and about God. We need to look at the parable in another way - look at it in terms of someone you love - who dies...

Sometimes a person dies full of years and honour, with his days work ended and his task completed. Sometimes a young person dies before the doors of life barely opened. The parable of the *Generous Landlord* teaches us that from God both will receive the same welcome. Christ is waiting, for neither, in the divine sense, has life ended too soon or too late.

My friends, we may be the workers who have worked all day in the heat but we will be paid what we agreed to, we are secure and safe - we know what is coming to us - and that it is enough,- and as such it is not for us to *grumble* and *complain* because God reaches out to others and treats them well. There is *Gospel* in this parable. The *Gospel* of The Landlord's love. The *Gospel* of God's love.

The *Landlord* who is God in the parable looks at us, and he sees our needs and he meets those needs. And the question in God's mind is not 'how much do these people deserve?'; but rather, 'how can I help them? How can I save them before they perish?'

And that is God's right - and God's pleasure, just as it is a landlord's right and pleasure to be generous with his help,

- ❖ to give them more than they deserve,
- ❖ to make their hearts glad
- ❖ It is all grace and blessings my friends.
- ❖ It is grace to be hired in the morning,
- ❖ and grace to be hired at noon time
- ❖ and grace to be hired near the end of the day.

Jesus said "The last will be first, and the first last. "not to tell us how things are in the world, but to warn those who are first about the dangers of forgetting how we got to be first, the danger of being so comfortable in our position of being first that we dare to question God's love for others who happen along after us. (The divisions created by society).

Brothers and sisters, the parable of the *Generous Landlord* is offensive:

- ❖ if you believe that God's love is something you earn.
- ❖ It is offensive if you do not cry over the hunger of the unemployed and weep over those who are wasting their lives away in things that do not profit them.
- ❖ It is offensive if you are the kind of trade unionist who believes that seniority is the only important thing - or the kind of business person who thinks that generosity only counts if it is tax deductible.

God isn't leading us by clouds and pillars of fire these days, but by the Word of Christ. Am I seeking it *first*? Am I hearing? Am I *listening*? Am I *following*? Am I *trusting*? My prayer is to try to find that balance, to not leave releasing envy and grumbling to the *last*.

But for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear the parable is glorious news about God's love for us all and generosity for all humanity, Indeed, it is a source of hope and strength for everyone who is called to labour in God's field rather than left to perish in the marketplace with those who have not been chosen. May our prayer to God be this:

O God thou who hast given so much to me, give me one thing more, a grateful heart, and help me Lord to remember that while it is possible to give without loving, it is impossible to love without giving. Amen.

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