

Matthew 20:1-16

South Plains

September 21, 2008

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

God's Equal Opportunity

Some of Jesus' parables are what we might call feel-good stories, stories that instantly warm our hearts with admiration. We rejoice in the open arms of the father as he welcomes the prodigal son back home. We want to emulate the faith of the woman whose faith has made her well. In those stories, Jesus blows on the spark of human goodness in our hearts until he has kindled the fire of faith.

But there's another kind of parable Jesus tells in the New Testament. These are parables that challenge our understanding and threaten our notion of what is good and right, stories that rub our fur the wrong way. The twentieth chapter of Matthew begins with such a challenging parable.

A farmer has a vineyard that needs some work. Perhaps it's harvest time and the grapes must be picked when they are ripe. At six o'clock in the morning he stops by the labor pool downtown and agrees to pay common laborers the standard daily wage. At nine o'clock he comes by the same corner and sees others standing idle. He tells them to go to work in his vineyard and promises to pay them what is right. He does the same thing at noon and again at three o'clock and again at five o'clock. Finally, he has a full complement of

workers. When evening comes, he tells his foreman, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first (20:8)."

Up to this point, the owner of the vineyard behaves like any hard-working farmer eager to get his crop harvested before the weather changes or the fruit spoils. Then he surprises everyone by giving all the workers exactly the same pay. That created problems. The folks who have sweated all day in the scorching sun and rubbed their fingers raw on a hundred vines, they get nothing more than the late-comers who barely got started before quitting time. There's grumbling. Anybody knows that's no way to run a business or to treat your employees.

The owner of the vineyard is tough. "Didn't you agree with me for the daily wage?" he says. "Take your money and go. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

If you are a boss who has owned her own small business, there is something attractive not only about the generosity of the vineyard owner, but also about his individualism. "I can do what I like with my money!" But, if you've been on salary and worked beside other people in the same organization, you can understand the grumbling of those who got no bonus for working ten times as hard and long as some others worked.

It is this last group of people that Jesus is addressing in this parable. Jesus has just said that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to get into the kingdom of God.” Peter, a poor fisherman, hears that and pipes up immediately. “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have (19:27)?” In other words, we have been working in your vineyard from the beginning, Lord. What’s going to be our reward?

I don’t think Peter was being mercenary. He knew the blessings of discipleship were not going to make him rich. But, he expected the kingdom of God to change the world. He wanted some assurance of the blessings of the coming kingdom. What Jesus tells Peter and us in this parable is that the one blessing that counts is the same for everyone. In the parable it’s the blessing of employment which I believe is the spiritual blessing of involvement, communion with the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

I can’t speak for other Christians, but I know that Presbyterians don’t like to be un-employed. And, we don’t want to be detached from God, uninvolved with God’s kingdom. Even when we are retired from earning a living, we want to be useful. We want to make a contribution to our community, and especially to our church.

In the Christian life, we are not looking for a paycheck from God, but we are hoping for a productive

relationship with God in Christ. We know that God owns the vineyard. We don’t have to be shareholders. We’re happy to be sharecroppers with the Lord. But, we want that relationship that acknowledges our place in the vineyard. We want to belong to the kingdom.

This parable says that God welcomes us all to a place in his vineyard whether we come first or last. God has the same blessing of forgiveness and new life for those of us who spend a lifetime in the church and for those who have just appeared at the door. It’s an odd grace that is freely available to anyone who will come. We don’t get any closer to God by working at Christianity than we do by accepting Christ. It’s a brutally democratic system that treats old Christians the same as young Christians; ordained leaders in the church the same as occasional pew-warmers; pillars who hold up the church get the same blessing of grace as trouble-makers in the church. Equal opportunity with God does not mean we all have the same chance to climb the ladder to heaven. It means we are all welcome. Justice does not mean we get what we deserve. We get more than we deserve. The measure of justice is how well we imitate God’s generosity.

Grace is free because God is free to bless whoever. Grumbling about God’s generosity will not get us any closer to the One we worship. In fact, grumbling drives us away because it is the opposite of God’s own character. When we try to decide how much we deserve to be paid or blessed, we immediately undermine our

relationship with God. The only way to draw nearer to our Savior is to put ourselves in the posture of a thankful recipient of grace. We may like to think of ourselves as having something to offer Almighty God in return, but that thought spoils the relationship. It's all grace.

When that grace saturates our lives and begins to soak into our very souls, we find our relationship to God is fundamentally joyful. We have an inner sense of well-being that colors everything we do, and transforms our other relationships within the church and outside the church.

Within the church, the most significant characteristic marking each believer is that we are saved by grace, forgiven out of the sheer goodness of God's heart, and granted new life as a gift. I cannot help but believe the early church remembered this parable and wrote it down in Matthew's Gospel because they needed to hear it again and again. They were a motley crew, those early Christians. They had been collected from all levels of society: slaves and freemen, rich tax collectors and blue-collar fishermen, well-bred ladies like Lydia and serving girls, Jews and Gentiles from every corner of the ancient world.

Like Peter, some had come early to Jesus. Others, like Paul, had come later. Many knew and kept the letter of the Law of Moses while many more Gentiles had no idea about biblical living. There must have been

moments when the old-timers from Jesus' Galilean ministry must have wondered if the Johnny-come-lately Christians would really have a place in God's kingdom. Jesus says God welcomes us all into the vineyard, receiving both the prodigal and the Pharisee with open arms.

We need to hear that parable also. One of the wonderful things about South Plains is that we are too old for what some people call a "charter member mentality." Nobody here today can begin a sentence by saying, "When we started this church...." South Plains was simply given to us, like grace itself.

Even so, we may have trouble getting used to seeing new faces in the pews. We don't recognize all the names in the directory, but that's why we occasionally will have Nametag Sunday when we ask everyone to wear a nametag. The single most important characteristic of every one of us in this building is that we are saved by grace. When that reality governs every relationship in this congregation, a lot of jealousy and grumbling goes out the window, and it's replaced by the overwhelming sense of gratitude for the gift of fellowship in Christ. Our relationships in church are transformed.

Furthermore, our relationships with those outside the church are also transformed. The New Testament church was tempted at one point to require that everyone first become a good Jew before they could become a good Christian. That's what the controversy about

circumcision was about. Some folks thought you couldn't come into the church until you had kept the Jewish law, God's law for Israel. Jesus said the only requirement for his followers was to repent and believe the gospel of forgiveness and new life.

Christians in 2008 are not tempted to make Jewishness a prerequisite of Christian faith. But, we sometimes have our own list of prerequisites. We may adopt an attitude that implies we know God so well that your experience of God doesn't count. Or, we may act as though our way of serving God is better than anyone else's service. I used to love watching the church lady on Saturday Night Live. She would interrogate people about their faith. When she found a weakness in their faith, she would dance her superiority dance around her victim. At every step, she got a little higher, a little more superior to everyone else.

The superiority Jesus demonstrated was his willingness to give everything to those he loved, even to the point of giving his life in order to preach the radical generosity of God. He did not target the quality people or the elite or the highly skilled or even those with the most potential for helping the kingdom. He offered the grace of God to good people and sinners, rich and poor, healthy and sick. All are welcome.

Every time we repeat Jesus' welcome, lives are touched by God's grace. Some of those lives are coming into God's vineyard. Sometimes we will see people in

church and wonder, "Where did they come from?" The answer is in this parable. The owner of the vineyard invited them. Maybe the invitation came a long time ago in some other church. Maybe the invitation came yesterday when the idea occurred to them, "Maybe I'll go to worship tomorrow." However, and whenever, we are each one of us welcome.