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The Church of the Good Shepherd
September 24, 2017
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 20:1-16

Come Holy Spirit and kindle in our hearts, the fire of your love. Amen.

Today, our gospel lesson is the familiar parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. As is the nature of parables, the story itself is curious. Parables are not metaphors or allegories – they are not simple stories pointing clearly to a single moral message. Rather, a parable is something more complex. Like metaphors and allegories, parables invite us to search for the meaning behind the surface, but they are designed to be surprising or baffling – to shock us into new ways of thinking.

In parables, things change and unexpected happens – frequently. We think we understand how things work only to find that the rules no longer apply. In this way, parables are useful tools for Jesus to reveal not only our own nature but the nature of God as it really is versus how we think it should be. Importantly, parables reveal that our God is not a god of human reason – not a god that follows the rules we construct.

In our lesson today, Jesus reveals the tension between God’s justice and human justice; between what is good and generous versus what seems “fair.” The story Jesus tells starts out as we might expect, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” This landowner does as is fitting: rising early, he goes to the marketplace to hire the workers needed for the day’s work in his fields. After coming to an agreement with them on the daily wage, he sets them to work. The story has its first surprise next when the landowner then returns to the marketplace a couple of hours later and, finding other workers standing idle, he hires them as well. He doesn’t promise a specific wage but assures them that he will pay “whatever is right.”

The story continues down this surprising path when the landowner returns again to the marketplace two more times that afternoon and does the same. This is curious because he seems to hire these workers not because of his need for more workers, rather simply because they were there, un-hired and standing around. Presumably the landowner hired the full work team needed the first time, yet he continues to go out and find more workers. And finally, at the end of the day with only one hour left of daylight, he returns yet again to the marketplace. Finding a few laborers still there waiting, he asks, “Why are you standing idle all day?” “Because no one has hired us,” they respond. And he hires them as well, this time without any promise of payment. He simply says, “you also go into the vineyard.”

The workers that had been hired early and labored all day naturally assumed that the pay received would be proportional to the quantity of work done. Therefore, they assumed they would be paid more than those hired later in the day. That would only be fair, right? And this is where the story gets really surprising. The landowner has the laborers paid in reverse order: those who come last are paid first. And rather than paying each laborer for the amount of work performed, the landowner has them all paid the same amount – and the first-hired laborers are incensed. That’s not fair, they exclaim. These last worked only an hour while we labored in the heat all day! To this, the landowner simply replies, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to

this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

With this, Jesus slams his point home. The economy of grace in the Kingdom of God is different than the economy of human justice. In fact, it would seem that our sense of fair and unfair, are distorted and imperfect lenses into the nature of God and his in-breaking kingdom. Here, our understanding of what is fair and deserved has no place, for God's justice and mercy function very differently. This parable reveals the uncomfortable truth of God's nature – that of radical grace and radical equality.

There is another element of the story that at work here as well. While, not explicitly called out in the parable, I can imagine the that this radical and gracious generosity of the landowner probably caused a growing discomfort among those who were hired first. A nagging fear that maybe there won't be enough for everyone...maybe the landowner's money will run out before he gets to paying me. These laborers who were hired first and worked all day watched as those late-comers were paid the full daily wage; and they must have had that voice of fear in their head wondering if they would even get paid at all.

Jesus teaches that, in the kingdom of God, generosity and equality is not something to be feared – in the kingdom, there will always be enough. This message is mirrored in our first lesson this morning from Exodus. In that lesson, the Israelites, newly freed from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, find themselves in the desert and proceed to do what humans tend to do: they start complaining. Barely, three days liberated, they started complaining about being thirsty, and so God provided water for them to drink. Then they start to complain that they are hungry, and, again, God provided for them but this time with a little twist: he will rain bread from heaven upon them each day – all that they will need – but only enough for that day. If, in their fear that there will not be enough, they attempt to hoard some for later, it will go bad. They will need to trust in God and trust that, in God, there will always be enough.

Over and again, Jesus asserts that the people of God need to trust that there will be enough – and enough for everyone. This is God's message to the Israelites in the desert. This Jesus' the message to the people of Israel in his day. This is the Holy Spirit's message to us today. Our God is one who promises that, if we trust and follow God's ways, there will be enough. God's divine economy is different than the economy of this world. Our world functions in an economy of scarcity – one in which there are limited resources, therefore we compete for what we can get. With that as a foundational assumption, it is only natural that the justice of this world be based on what is deemed "fair": that justice is based upon what is deserved, earned, merited.

But our scriptures repeatedly reveal a God who functions very differently and a kingdom with a very different economy. The kingdom of God functions on an economy of abundance, not scarcity. That, all appearances to the contrary, there is enough, and therefore there is no need competition. The only resources we really need are given us by God – by a God from whom all blessings flow and with whom all things are possible. In God's economy of abundance, there will always be enough, even when we can't imagine how that is possible. God's grace is endless and the invitation is always there. In fact, as Jesus' parable shows, the landowner not only allows workers into his vineyard at any time, he actually pursues the laborers – over and again.

In the abstract, we love this idea – that God rains his blessing and mercy upon all: the just and the unjust; the sinner and the saint; those who get with the program right away as well as those who join at the 11th hour. But, like the laborers in the vineyard, when it becomes personal, it can become a harder pill to swallow. Unmerited grace makes us uncomfortable because we

really like a good meritocracy, don't we? That makes sense to us – we know how to play that game.

But if this grace is unmerited, there is nothing we can do, apart from trust in God. And that is what is asked of us – to trust in God. Trust that in God's kingdom, there is always enough – that there, abundance is truth, not scarcity. Thankfully, since trust is hard for us, Jesus promises us that, like the landowner in the parable, God is coming to us, seeking us each out over and over again. And, upon finding us, God invites us to live in this kingdom reality; to live in the abundance of God's grace and love. If we can listen with the ear of our hearts, we will hear this eternal hymn of love that God sings to us: "I love you. There is enough. You are enough." It seems that in God's kingdom, God is enough...for all of us.

This week, I invite you to reflect on a time when you were surprised to find that there was enough. When God provided in a surprising way, and the meager offering of five loaves of bread and two fish became a feast enough for everyone in the great crowd. Remember a time when, even though you could not imagine a path through your trouble, you stepped forward anyway only to find a path undreamed of rise up to meet you. Remember a time when you were surprised to find abundance amid a world of scarcity.

Amen.