

Pentecost 15, Year A, Proper 20
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If you had to choose between justice (being fair) and love, which would you choose? Both are really important, of course, and you might want to choose both, not one over the other. Today's Gospel parable, found only in Matthew, is well-known but not one that is a particular favorite among most of us, I'm guessing, because it seems to be forcing us to make a choice. And it is a hard choice indeed. In this country, our ideas of fairness are important to us - that is, we say we believe in equal pay for equal work (except still where women are concerned), and in equal opportunity for all (at least, on the surface). But equal pay for unequal work? That is an abomination!

Let's look first at the workers who were chosen last in the day. They had probably given up hope for work that day and were about to start walking home, when they were hired for the last hour. They hadn't been hanging around, just hoping to make a little extra pocket change to be able to spend; they were day laborers who expected no more than a daily wage, which was just barely enough to support them and their families for one more day. There was no extra to save up for a rainy day, or a nice vacation, or even to patch the hole in the roof. Their norm was what we call now 'food insecurity.'

So imagine how excited they would have been to be given the chance to work even one hour, when it had looked like they would have had no work at all! And, when they were paid for a full day at the end of the hour, imagine how much more their excitement grew! I bet they were both grateful and relieved. I would have been. Let's look now at those folks who had been hired to work at the beginning of the day. They, too, lived from day to day on the most basic pay, and they were grateful, too, to have the chance to work for an entire day's wage. It was probably not interesting work to most of them, or fulfilling, or anything they had dreamed about doing when they were children; it was likely hard, hot, tiring, even exhausting work in harsh conditions. No breaks. No employee cafeteria. No insurance plan or retirement fund.

So when, at the end of another long, hard day, they begin to hear the news that the people who had only just been hired were paid for a full day, imagine the excitement they must have felt as they began to figure out the amount of pay that could be theirs! It was a reasonable expectation, don't you think? But their hopes are dashed when they receive the same payment. It had to have seemed totally unfair. They had worked ten times longer than the others. How could the boss treat them this way?!

And they became resentful. So the landowner reminds them that he has treated them fairly by paying them what they agreed to be paid. And he wonders why they are mad with him for his act of generosity.

So what are we to make of this parable? I dare say that most of us identify most with the grumbling workers, don't we? We say that we all believe in equal pay for equal work, so if someone does less than we do, we think that person should not get paid as much as we do. Worse is when someone does less than we do and gets paid MORE than we get. That is definitely not fair!

I remember that when I worked in the hospital, sometimes there would be a market adjustment for the wages of a group of workers - maybe the lab techs or the LPNs or just the nurses in the Cath Lab. Well, as soon as the rest of the employees heard about it, they - we - would grumble about how it wasn't fair, that we hadn't had a raise in who-knows-when, that we were the ones who worked the hardest, etc, etc. We made plenty of money - we weren't going to starve (except, of course, for the people who really DO work the hardest but get paid the least: housekeeping, cafeteria, groundskeepers - all of them are in the new class known as the 'working poor'). But, the truth is that we, like the day laborers who had worked all day long, were envious. We wanted to be the ones who earned the most money. It wasn't fair!

So...back to the parable. Is the point of this story supposed to be that we can work as little as possible, or even not at all, and we will still be rewarded? No, that's not the point. But it does seem to point out our tendency to think that we - as a class, or a race, or a nation - belong at the front of the line, and that God will make sure that is where we are.

And when did our obsession with fairness turn into an opinion about someone's goodness or moral uprightness? Or what about our idea that some work is more important, more worthy, than other kinds of work? In our rush to be the ones on top, the ones first in line, we have passed judgment on the workers who worked for less than the whole day. We act as if these people - these day laborers - choose not to work every day, or choose not to work for the whole day, because they are lazy or worthless or unwilling to try.

Then we morph that into a generalization...it's people who are in a certain social class or with certain lifestyles that we don't like - they are ones usurping what we should be getting. Surely God, who called me to the vineyard, wouldn't also call a person like that! (Just as an aside, it was amazing to me in preparing for this sermon that there was judgment even in the commentaries that I read, where some writers called them slackers, or even suggested that the ones who

were hired at the end of the day were 'sleeping it off' up until then!) And so, we look down on people who need help, as if it is their fault that the "Great American Dream" doesn't come true for everyone.

We've talked before about the rules of parables. Do you remember them? Parables are not stories with morals at the end; they aren't allegories; they refer to common things familiar to those who are listening to them, and they always have some sort of twist or surprise to them that brings us up short. Well, the twist in today's parable is that God's economy is not like the world's economy. In this world we hand out pay according to the number of hours worked. In this world not everyone has the opportunity to earn enough money to care for their families. In this world we reward those who already have enough by giving them more than they can possibly need in a lifetime, or even several lifetimes, while the poorest of the poor get paid the very least.

But in God's world, love and justice work together and there is enough for everyone. The rules of God's world aren't the same as the rules of this world. This world discriminates, divides people into social classes, holds some people up for admiration and others for derision, and generally puts up arbitrary barriers between groups of people. This world insists on justice, but it is often only the rich and powerful who receive it. God's world is different, because in God's world everyone is equal and everyone is loved: poor and rich, black and white, female and male, gay and straight, mentally challenged and intelligent, disabled and whole. Like the landowner, God shares with all of us God's benefits - grace, worth, dignity, justice and love - equally and radically generously.

No matter how much we identify with the people who worked all day, in the end we have to realize that we are the latecomers, the ones who didn't have any reason to expect such extravagant generosity! This is the God we discover in Jesus - the God who loves us and therefore overlooks our shortcomings, choosing instead to love us with unearned grace, mercy and kindness.

It's our job to transform this world into God's world - by sharing that extravagant love with those who come at the beginning of the day, and with those who don't come until the end. It may not seem fair at first. It may seem like a risky thing to do. But there is more than enough. We can do it; will we?