Sunday, January 20, 1974
A STORY ABOUT A CRAZY FARMER (Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard)
Matthew 20:1-16

The parable we have just heard from the Gospel of Matthew has been called by some — a story about a crazy farmer.

It was harvest time, and the work was plentiful. The owner of the farm went repeatedly into the marketplace — the hiring hall of his day to recruit workers for his fields. It was the practice to go to the marketplace very early in the morning to get as many persons as possible to work all day, from sunset to sundown.

In this case, the owner of the farm hired a number of workers to work the full day. Later in the day, about 9:00 in the morning, the owner of the vineyard went back to the marketplace in order to hire more men and he agreed to pay them for the day. Then again at 12:00 noon and again at 3:00 in the afternoon. the owner of the vineyard went to the marketplace and hired more workers each time. Also, about 5:00 in the afternoon, he went once more to the marketplace and found other persons available, and he hired them even though the day was almost over.

Then at the end of the day, the farmer called all the men to be paid as was the practice in those days. And here is where the story takes a surprising turn. The farmer paid one dollar to those who were hired to work all day and he paid the same amount to all the rest of the workers, even those who were hired near the end of the day and had worked only about one hour.

As we would expect this crazy, insanely generous act on the part of the farmer caused some grumbling among the rest of the workers. Those who had worked all day said, “These last fellows have only put in about one hour’s work 1 and you’ve treated them exactly the same as us who have gone through all the hard work and the heat of the day.

Surely all of us here would agree that those who worked all day had a good case for feeling that they should be paid more than those who had not worked as long. At the same time, according to the parable, the farmer had lived up to his agree with the workers. Those who worked all day had received the wages promised to them when they took the job. Still these workers felt that the owner had permitted his generosity, goodness, and sympathy to sway his calculation of what was due the late arrivals on the job. Like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, they felt they had been slighted.

The owner of the vineyard reminded them that they were not being cheated. In effect he said, “My friends, I’m. not being unfair to you. Wasn’t our agreement for one dollar for the day’s work? And didn’t you receive that amount? Take your money and go home. It is my wish to give the latecomers as much as I gave you. May I not do what I want with what belongs to me? Why are you so jealous because I am generous with someone?”

Now what does this parable mean? No human farmer or busi-ness man could behave that way and remain in business very long. Even today, as we hear the parable, we are affronted by the farmer’s overpayment to those who worked only the last hour of the day. It is by our normal standards — crazy behavior.

Remember, however, that we are dealing with a parable! Thus, Jesus in telling the story was not trying to set up a pattern for employer — employee relationships in our society. Nor was he trying to picture the ideal business behavior for us.

In this case, Jesus began the story by saying — "the Kingdom of God is like," what happens in this story. Thus, the parable is telling us something about God and what he does and how we are to respond.

Let's look at that more closely.

1. Note first in the parable that God the householder calls some to work early in the morning and some later and some near the end of the day. Why all were not called to work early in the morning we do not know. Maybe they weren't present at the early hour in the marketplace when the farmer hired those who worked all day. Maybe they were present, but the farmer was not sure how many workers he needed.

Yet life itself is sometimes like that. Some find the work they need early or whatever they happen to be seeking, and others are called much later in life. We do know that there is an inequality among us. Some people have good health and abounding energy and others poor health and very little energy. Some die young and others life and are able to work for a much longer time.

Some people never really find themselves until late in life — they are drifters and have difficulty in keeping at one thing, but then sometimes even rather late in life, they find themselves and are happy at least for a few years. Some people seem to always be passed over when se-lections are made and then are chosen only late in life. Some people are generously rewarded for whatever they do and yet others seem not to be. Why the difference? No one really knows and, in this parable, Jesus did not attempt to answer that question.

But the parable does indicate that once we are called, we should devote any energy or talents we have, whether many or few to whatever we are doing. Then when the day is done, when life is over, God rewards us all simply because we worked and were faithful in our work. And God does not compare what we have or do with others. God treats us each individually. Such is God's generosity.

This is really a parable of God's love, of God's generosity. In a similar way, God does not forgive in degrees. He does not dole out his love in a carefully graduated beaker of rewards. God gives to us, immediately, wholly, overwhelmingly and in ways more than we deserve.

The point of the parable is that God's love for us is so passionate that if human beings behaved toward one another the way He behaves toward us, they would be written off as lunatics.

2. Note secondly, that the parable also shows how we many times misunderstand and are jealous of God's generosity. This is what happened with those who had worked all day in the vineyard. They did not understand that work and life in God's vineyard, being called by God early in life, finding oneself early in life, is in itself a gift and carries with it its own reward.

Why is it that we almost automatically assume that the loafer, or the person who doesn't make much of an effort to find work, is happier than we are in our work? Would we want to trade places with them even if we got paid for loafing? We like to think we would, but I wonder.

Also in this parable, Jesus is speaking against the kind of legalistic reward religion that is so much a part of all of us. We like to think that our religion is something we practice in order to get us a reward when this life is done. And because we think this, we go on to assume t.at since we have been Christians from little on up, our reward will be greater than those who became Christians late in life. It is this kind of thinking that the parable is trying to correct.

The point is when we do something for our Lord, when he calls us, when we surrender our lives to him with all our joys and sorrows, this is not just a means to a future end; we are not to do it merely for the hope of gaining a reward at the end of the day, but rather as we do it, as we work, as we practice our faith, we will find a greater joy in the here and now than we ever experienced before.

Thus, the person who loves God and works according to his will as he discovers it; for that person everything he or she does for God is in itself a happy service and there-fore the very opposite of a hard drudgery for which he thinks he must be appropriately awarded with something special from God.

Does not much of the torment of life, the ambition which keeps gnawing at us, the worry which robs us of our sleep, the bad conscience which keeps accusing us, the anxiety of life that makes everything seem hapless, empty, and dismal, does not much of this arise precisely from the fact that we have not seen ourselves as co-workers with God and that we are rather only looking or worrying about a reward in the end. In so doing, we miss much of the joy of life in the present.

On the other hand, the person who sees the present, who sees. his or her work, and who sees himself as a co-worker with God and for God, comes to see that his whole attitude toward his life and work is different. He sees his small life and all the little everyday things in it, all the duties he has to fulfill, and all the people he meets, fitting into a great program of which God is ultimately in control.

Part of God’s generosity is seen in his calling us to work early in the day instead of late. Anyone who has ever gone through something difficult with the knowledge that God was right there with him — that person would not have missed the experience. And he does not say, “Because of all the hard- ships I have had to undergo in this life, God must surely give me a higher place in heaven than some others.” What he does say is this: “Not until I went down into the depths did I experience the nearness of God.”

Thus, we can see why the workers in the vineyard who worked all day were on the wrong track when they complained and really misunderstood the generosity of God. They were privileged to be workers in God’s vineyard all day.

And what about those who were called to work late in the day? If the latecomers to faith really understand that it is God who has called them into his service, the idea will not occur to them to laugh at the others because they have worked from early morning through the heat of the day.

On the contrary, since this is God’s kingdom the parable is talking about, the latecomer will regret every hour spent in idleness, every hour before he found his way through to the meaning of his life.

And in the evening, the latecomer will realize that all this time he spent without work in the marketplace was not a good time after all; and he was not really happy in it either. That's why it's so strange that some of us look at the idle and secretly envy them. Or why we look at someone who has led an evil life without God and then one day repents at the last moment perhaps and finds God, and we envy them--when in reality we are the fortunate ones. Those who truly repent late in life would give anything if they could live their lives over again in a different way

This is really a parable of joy. And it speaks directly to us. Note again the reply of the crazy farmer to those who complain that their compensation should be larger than those who came to work late in the day, or really that the farmer should pay those who came to work later much less.

God replies — Do you begrudge my generosity? Why are you so worried and envious? If I had hired no more persons at all during the day and merely paid you at the end of the day, you would have been happy enough. You are unhappy because you are comparing yourself to the others who didn't work so long. I am not making you suffer in any way whatsoever by being generous to these part-time workers.

God's answer speaks to our situation. For isn't it true that when we are all for generosity and kindness in theory. But see generosity and kindness being practiced toward someone else when we think we should've deserved it, then we are not so much for it.

One writer, commenting on this parable put it this way. "When I see God giving something out of the ordinary to my competitor, my colleague, perhaps even to my friend, I get sore and begin to check up on the way the various quotas of blessing are handed out and distributed.

Also, when God in his goodness and generosity hands out bonuses to others and I grow jealous, I do not normally re-proach myself and call myself a miserable grudger. Nor do I say: the generosity, the boundless goodness of God. I only say this when the bonus comes my way. Otherwise, the generosity of God seems unjust, and he is like the crazy farmer in this parable. I may say to myself — "Did this other fellow deserve more goodness than I? Look at me, I saved and worked, but this other fellow comes in late and gets an equal reward.

We all know these thoughts. We know them all too well. We can embitter may hours of life with thoughts like these; and the dismal song always has the same refrain, and it goes like this — God's goodness comes to the wrong person be-cause it doesn't come to me.

Those who worked all day in the vineyard were well-satisfied with the farmer and with their reward until they began to compare. That's when the trouble began.

In this matter of comparing and our jealousy, one person suggests this simple experiment: In those times when we feel God is surely treating other persons better than we, ask yourself this — Would you exchange places with the other person in every respect? Not just your Chevrolet for his Cadillac, but also his deeply troubled life. Not only your small house for her mansion, but also her boredom, her anxiety, for your simple but less troubled life. Would you exchange your life, your circumstances, in every respect with that of another person whom you consider more blessed by God? It might be a risky trade.

You see, we can never know all of another's person's life and circumstance. Therefore, all our comparisons are misleading and false. But the parable is implying that God sees each one of

us completely. And frankly I'm glad that God is the "crazy farmer" who is handing out the things of life rather than one of us having the job.

So, this is a parable of God's generosity — a generosity to which He wants us to respond with joy rather than jealously. God wants us to celebrate his generosity when it comes to us and also when it comes to others. Furthermore, God's standards are not our standards, God's ways are not our ways, and that's why they may seem crazy to us sometimes.

Rather than all the time calculating, the parable calls us to thank God for what he has given us, for he has given us even more than we deserved, and it furthermore calls us to thank him for giving to the other person generously. God gives according to our needs and not just according to our deserts.

Try it this week. Try rejoicing again and again at the good fortune of others and well as your own. Amen.