Sunday, September 30, 1979
IT ISN'T FAIR!
Matthew 20:1-16

"It isn't fair!" That's what many people say when they hear the parable just read as the scripture reading this morning. Here is the owner of a vineyard who wanted to have his grapes picked. So early in the morning he went to the local marketplace and signed on some men to work in his vineyard for that day at an agreed upon wage. They were to begin work at six in the morning and work to six in the evening. Later the same morning, about nine o'clock, the owner decided that he needed more workers, so he went back to the marketplace and signed on some more. Still later, about noon time, the owner hired more workers, and also at three o'clock he hired more and then at five o'clock, one hour before quitting time, he hired still more.

We don't know why the owner of the vineyard didn't hire them all early in the morning. Maybe he wasn't sure that he would need them all, but as the work progressed, he discovered that if all the grapes were to be picked, he would need a lot more help. Maybe also, he didn't need the extra workers, but kept going back to hire more simply because the men in the marketplace needed work. Each time he went back to the marketplace he was checking to see if other employers had hired those who needed work to feed their families, and since there were still those who had no work, he gave them a job. This last theory is as good as any.

We do have to assume that all those who were waiting for work in the marketplace wanted to work. That's why they were there.

At the end of the day the owner told his payroll clerk to pay each of the workers, but he asked that it be done in an unusual way. He insisted on paying first the men who came to work last and had worked only one hour, and he gave them the same amount of pay as all the others. If the owner had been smart, he would've paid those who worked all day first, and sent them away, then paid the next and the next. Instead, those who had worked all day noticed very quickly that those who had worked only one hour and those who had worked only three hours were getting the same amount of money that the owner had promised them and to which they had agreed.

Thus, they began to think in their own minds, no doubt the owner will pay us more than the agreed upon wage since he has given those who worked the shorter day the same amount as he had promised us for the entire day. "But when the first came they thought they would receive more."

We're not surprised at what happened when the owner paid them what they had earlier agreed on. Those who had worked all day complained that it wasn't fair. They said, "Here we've worked all day through the scorching heat, we've worked almost twelve hours, and you've paid those who worked only one hour, and three hours and six hours and nine hours the same amount of money that you've paid us. It isn't fair."

However, the owner of the vineyard reminded those who had worked all day that they had not been defrauded. He had paid them the wage they had agreed on when they took the job. And he added, "Why should you be jealous because I choose to be generous to those who have stood all day in the marketplace looking for work, worrying because they could not earn enough to keep themselves or feed their families? They need as much money as you to feed their children. Why are you so envious of my generosity?"

No doubt those who had worked all day went on to think to themselves, “well of course you have not actually defrauded us. We got what you agreed to pay us. But it’s the principle of the thing.” Have you noticed how we also can quickly find principles to stand on when our selfish interest is involved? What principle is involved here I don’t really know, but we can usually find one.

What is the meaning of this parable for us? It is not a parable telling us how we should organize our economic life or how we should set up our personnel systems or how our churches, industries or business should pay wages. Remember Jesus began the parable by saying, “THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE THIS.” He did not begin by saying, “all your industries should be like this.”

The context in which the parable is set in the gospel of Matthew gives us a hint about the story’s meaning. Right before Jesus told this parable, he had been having a discussion with his disciples about God’s kingdom, and how God’s love is for all people. Peter had asked then, “Don’t we get some extra reward since we have left everything behind and followed you from the beginning. We’re the first ones. We have staked our existence on you, given up our jobs, sacrificed our families; what do we get that’s extra?”

He was really asking, “are we going to be on the same level as the people who take it easy and enjoy life until they grow too old and too worn out to amuse themselves as they did before and then suddenly have an attack of religion, a kind of last-minute religious panic, or a death bed conversion? Will they have the same reward as the rest of us?”

Jesus replied to Peter and the other disciples by telling this parable. Here are the main points to remember about its meaning.

1. First, with this parable Jesus is saying that God loves all of us equally. God loves us if we decide to take God seriously in the last moments of life, as much as God loves others who have been open to God from the beginning. This is above all a parable about God’s generosity, about God’s grace toward all people. It’s a parable which reminds us that we do not earn God’s love — it is given to us, and God gives us as much as we need, all we have to do is be open to it and accept it.

God does not treat us as we treat each other. God judges differently than we do. God loves differently than we do. “For my ways are not your ways,” says the Lord. The kingdom of heaven is like this parable is what Jesus was saying. This is a parable which rejects legalistic religion, the concept that God rewards us according to what we’ve earned.

2. Secondly, this is a parable which reminds us that God’s Kingdom is often a startling reversal of our usual and ordinary way of looking at things. Thus, Jesus said to Peter before he told him the parable—“But many that are first will be last, and the last first.” Jesus ended the parable with a similar reminder, “So the last will be first, and the first last.” God is full of surprises!

For us in the kingdoms of this world, success is usually measured by how much a person can get and keep. But the Kingdom of Heaven is just the opposite, said Je.us. The more you give away, the more you give yourself ·away, the more you will find meaning in life and happiness.

Many of the teachings of Jesus contain startling reversals of the way we usually operate. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We usually think, blessed

are the rich, blessed are those who put themselves first, blessed are those who are famous, blessed are those who are completely sure of themselves all the time, for they have everything. Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” We say, blessed are the strong, the powerful, those who can take what they want, blessed are the aggressive, those with the m.ost guns, the most guided. missiles, the most hydrogen bombs, the largest armies, for they shall inherit the earth.

Read the gospels and everything is reversed from our ordinary point of view. “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,’ but I say to you, ‘do not resist one who is evil, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him to the other also.'” You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ (that’s the way the world operates) but I say to you, ‘love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.'”

And in this parable of the workers in the vineyard — The kingdom of heaven is like what takes place in the story. God rewards us according to our needs, not according to what we think we deserve or what others think we deserve.

3. Note thirdly, that even though the Kingdom of Heaven reverses our usual way of doing things, it’s not easy for us to accept.

In this parable, those who worked all day were envious of those who worked only one hour or three hours or six hours or nine hours and got paid the same. Think about it for a moment, why couldn’t they rather have rejoiced because of their fellow worker’s good fortune? Now these other workers who couldn’t find work earlier in the day would at least have enough money to feed their families. That should be cause for thanksgiving.

Thus, the owner of the vineyard asked them, “Is your eye evil because I am good? Do you begrudge my generosity?” Translated into our terms this means, “Do you who have worked all day have so much envy in you simply because I chose to give your fellow workers a measure of kindness and generosity? What I gave them is not coming out of your pay. You’re not getting any less because of my generosity. You would’ve been quite happy with your pay if you had not known of what I paid these other workers, but now because you begin to make comparisons you are envious.”

Most of us are all for generosity and kindness, but when it is shown to another, why do we get so envious? The long-term workers in the story would ·certainly have had no quarrel with the householder’s generosity if they them. selves had been the recipients.

Envy is one of our most insidious diseases. When we see some good things coming to our competitor, our colleague, perhaps even to our best friend, we so easily get sore and begin to check up on the way the various quotas of blessing are being handed out and distributed.

Envy and jealousy in salary negotiations seem to crop up more than in most places. Our own sense 0£ worth seems to be tied up too much with how much we are being paid. Many workers are quite happy with their pay, but if they discover that someone else is getting more, envy and the unhappiness that is always connected to envy sets in.

The issue is really not have I been treated fairly, but how do I compare to others. It’s when we begin comparing that the disease of envy most often strikes us.

Remember too, that we will never be able to see the goodness of God with an envious eye. Envy is a blinding ailment. Many of our doubts about goodness, many of our feelings of anxiety, of being deserted and forgotten, do not emerge from our deepest intellectual doubts at all, but come from the fact that we have a wrong attitude toward our neighbor.

Anyone who looks at God's blessings with one eye and with the other eye tries to keep track of whether others are receiving a little bit more than oneself, falls victim to the diseased kind of seeing that makes one incapable of either recognizing what a blessing is or understanding others. One then becomes an unhappy and ill-tempered human being who is always feeling sorry for oneself.

The parable then is above all telling us to avoid the disease of envy because God's love is open to all of us. Much of the time we're envious, we really have nothing at all to be envious about. God cares about all of us. We are safe and secure in the grace and goodness of God.

Therefore, when envy seizes us, we can stop our nerve-racking calculations as to whether God is giving more to someone else. Instead, we can thank God for God has given to us and continually gives us and pray that God will support and comfort those others in their secret trials and troubles of which we have no knowledge at all. Amen.