Sunday, October 14, 1984
GOD'S GENEROSITY
Matthew 20:1-16

What a strange way to do business! That's what many people think when they hear the parable just read. The owner of a vineyard needed to have his grapes picked. So early in the morning, he went to the local marketplace to hire workers for the day. He agreed to pay them a fair wage of one denarius for the day. Later in the morning, he returned to the same place and hired more laborers and told them he would pay them a fair wage. At noon and at three o'clock in the afternoon he did the same. With one hour remaining in the work day, he returned to the marketplace and found still others who had not been able to get work for that day — so he also sent them to the vineyard and promised to pay them.

In the story, Jesus does not tell us why the owner of the vineyard didn't hire all the available workers early in the morning. Maybe he wasn't sure that he would need them all, but as the work progressed, he discovered tat if all the grapes were going to be picked, he would need a lot more help.

Or, maybe he didn't need the extra workers at all, but kept going back to the marketplace to hire more people because he knew each one needed the work. Each time he went back he was checking to see if other employers had hired those who were idle, and since he knew they needed they work to support their families, he gave them a job.

The assumption is of course that all those who were waiting to work in the marketplace wanted to work. That's why they were there. It was a common practice in those days to come to a central place and be available to farmers and others who could employ the needed workers.

At the end of the day, the owner told his payroll clerk to pay each of the workers, but in reverse order — beginning with those who had been hired last and then on down to those who had been hired early in the morning. Then came the surprise! He paid each man a <u>full</u> day's wages, even though some of them had only worked one hour, some three hours, some six hours, some nine hours and some twelve hours. Naturally, each one noticed what his fellow workers were being paid. Perhaps if the owner had paid those who had come to work early in the morning first, and then on up through the day, and after each group had been paid, sent them away — no one would've noticed that each group had been paid the same.

Instead, by paying those who had come to work late in the day a full day's wages, it caused the others to think that they were going to get more than a full day's wages. In fact, according to the story, that's exactly what they said. "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

However, the owner reminded them that he had not defrauded them in any way. He paid them exactly what they had together agreed on as a fair wage. 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 and their good fortune?"

No doubt those who had worked all day went on to think to themselves, “Well of course you have not actually defrauded us. We get what you agreed to pay us. But it’s the principal of the thing.” Most of us can quickly find principles to stand on when our selfish interest is involved.

What is the meaning of this parable? It is not its purpose to tell us how we should organize our economic life or how we should set up our personal systems; or how our churches, industries or businesses should pay wages. Remember Jesus began the parable by saying, “The Kingdom of God is like a householder who went out early in the morning...”

In addition, 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 story, he had been having a discussion with his disciples about god’s Kingdom and how God’s love is for all people. In the discussion, Peter had asked him, “don’t we get some extra reward since we have left everything and have been following you longer than anyone else? We’re the first ones. We’ve staked our whole life on you, given up our jobs, sacrificed our families — so what do we get that’s extra?”

Peter was asking what some people ask today. “Are we going to be on the same level in God’s Kingdom as the people who take it easy and enjoy life until they grow too old and too worn out to amuse themselves, and then suddenly late in life become religious? Will they have the same reward as the rest of us who have tried to be faithful all our lives or most of our lives?”

It was in answer to this kind of question that Jesus told this story. Here then, are some of the main points to remember about its meaning.

1. First, with this parable, Jesus is saying that God loves us all equally. God loves us if we decide to take God seriously only in the last moments of our 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 to all people. It’s a parable which reminds us that we do not earn God’s love — it is always given to us, and God gives each one of us as much as we need — all we have to do is to be open to it and accept it.

In other words, God does not treat us as we often treat each other. God judges differently than we do. This is a parable which rejects legalistic or “reward” religion. It rejects the heresy that God loves some people more than others because they are more religious than the rest of us — or because they attend the “right” church, or because they earned God’s love. Too many people think of religion as something to be done to earn God’s favor. It’s like the stockholder commercial. “We make religion the old-fashioned way — you have to earn God’s favor.”

At the same time, the parable is quite accurate in its description of what happens in our life together. In the parable, some people are called to work early in the morning and work faithfully all day while others are idle. Life is like that. Some find the right direction for their life early, while others seem to drift and have more difficultly finding that’s right for them. We’ve all known people who have tried several vocations or professions before they find what’s best for them, or young people who drop out of college for a while because they’re not sure what they should be doing with their lives.

Some people find God early in life, while others do not experience God’s love until late in life.

The parable takes into consideration that life is uneven. Some people have good health and abounding energy and others poor health and very little energy. Some die young for no

apparent reason and others are able to live and work and find meaning in their work until they are very old.

Some people seem always to be passed over when selections are made and then are chosen only late in life. And some people seem to be generously rewarded for whatever they do while others seem not to be. Why the difference? No one really knows and, in the parable, Jesus did not attempt to answer such questions.

But again, what the parable does indicate is that God's love, god's grace is available for all and at any point in life. God does no dole out love in a carefully graduated beaker of rewards.

2. Secondly, this is a parable then which reminds us that God's Kingdom, or God's way is frequently a startling reversal of our usual and ordinary way of looking at things. Thus, Jesus said to Peter before he told this story — "But many that are first will be last and the last first." And Jesus ended this parable with the same kind of statement — "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 God's Kingdom is just the opposite, said Jesus. The more you give away, the more you will find meaning in life and happiness.

Most 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 God." 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 at all times, 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 most guns, the most guided missiles; 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 any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to that one 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 — Jesus said, The Kingdom of God is like what takes place in this 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 God reverses our usual way of thinking and of doing things, it's not easy for us to accept. We misunderstand and are jealous of God's generosity.

In the parable, those who were luck enough to be hired early in the morning and who worked all day were envious of those who worked only one hour or three hours or six hours and got paid the same.

They did not understand that work and life in God's vineyard, being called by God early in life, finding one's self early in life, is in itself a gift and carries with it its own reward.

Why do we automatically assume that the person who hasn't been able to find work, or find direction in his or her life, or find God, is happier than we are? Or why do we seem to assume that a person who has wasted most of his or her life and only begins to be productive late in life, has had more fun and joy than the rest of us?

Why couldn't those who had worked all day have rejoiced because of their fellow worker's good fortune? After all, those who couldn't find work earlier in the day now at least had enough money to care for their families. That should be cause for thanksgiving.

The owner of the vineyard rightly asked those who had worked all day — "Why are you so envious? What I choose to pay the other workers is not coming out of your pocket. You're not getting any less because of my generosity. You would've been quite satisfied with your pay if you had not known what I paid these other workers, but now because you begin to make comparisons, you are envious."

Envy is one of our most insidious diseases. When we see some good things coming to someone else, perhaps even our best friend, we so easily become jealous and begin to check up on the way the various quotas of blessings are being handed our and distributed. When something bad happens to us, we ask, "Why me?" And when something good happens to someone else, we ask, "Why not me?"

When we begin to make comparisons, we are not asking the question, "Am I being treated fairly?" But rather, "How do I compare to others."

The big problem with envy is that it blocks our vision and our understanding. When we are envious we can no longer see the goodness and grace of God. 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 thee diseased kind of seeing that makes one incapable of recognizing what a blessing is.

With this parable, Jesus is saying that God sees and knows each one of us completely, and that God loves us each one equally. God's love and grace are given to us generously.

This is a parable of God's generosity. Rather than all the time calculating, the parable calls us to be thankful for what we have, for God has given us even more than we deserved. Try this week to rejoice at the good fortune of others, as well as your own. Amen.