

October 12, 2008
FCMF #2

“Gettin What You Deserve!”

There is something deeply unsettling about today’s reading. Yes, each of the workers in Jesus’ parable does receive in the end what they had agreed to work for. And though they were paid, “whatever was fair,” it still doesn’t seem quite fair- it doesn’t feel fair that those who “labored all day” in the vineyard were paid the same as those who came so much later. So... wazup Jesus, what’s the deal here?

Well first we need to realize that this parable is typical of Jesus’, or what we might call quintessential of the stories the historical Jesus would tell. Those who study the historical Jesus attribute the following components to those parables that they feel are authentic to Jesus. Typically these parables cut against both the social and religious grain. The parables of Jesus also surprise and shock the audience and they do this by calling for a reversal of roles or by frustrating ordinary, everyday expectations. Parables that are true to Jesus also include exaggeration, humor and paradox. And though the images that Jesus paints are concrete and vivid and taken from the stuff of real life, his parables are customarily metaphorical and end without explicit application and are marked with ambiguity. They are stories that deliberately sow confusion in the listeners, forcing them to consider the story carefully so as not to be misled by too easy a conclusion.

In today’s passage, Jesus invites us once again to consider, what the scholar’s version translates as, “Heaven’s Imperial Rule” is like. Matthew seems to like this term a lot and has already likened God’s Imperial rule to such things as; a wedding banquet, a mustard seed, a hidden treasure and a net that catches lots of very different looking fish. In Matthew 18 (which I preached on in Sept) heaven’s imperial rule was “compared to a secular ruler who decided to settle accounts,” in a story contrasting forgiveness and the lack of forgiveness. This parable was also troubling and asked its listeners to puzzle over an ending which was not at all conclusive. If you recall I indicated that Matthew in the end came to the wrong conclusion and edited the story in a way that gives the impression that God is as vindictive and unmerciful as was the ruler toward his unmerciful servant. A story that asked folks to think carefully about a very important question, “how often must I forgive?” ends up advocating, hmm... how shall I say it... rather un-Jesus like ideas.

This parable of the unforgiving servant, as well as today's passage of the vineyard owner, certainly express many of the above mentioned characteristics of Jesus' parables. But these two parables are seemingly in sharp contradiction to each other. But before I go there let's first look a little more at today's reading. Jesus first exaggerates the activity of the "proprietor" as he repeatedly goes out, no less than four times, to hire more workers. There is also surprise and shock as those who came to work towards the end of the day are paid a full day's wage. The complaints of those who worked all day are certainly understandable. And since those who worked all day have watched the others get their pay, they would have only concluded that they too will get paid more than what they had originally bargained for. The owner's careful instructions to the forman to "pay the last hired first and the first to be hired, last," certainly can lead the listener and the reader to the same expectation.

The behavior of the "proprietor" also departs from the social norms of Jesus' time (as well as ours), since most landowners would certainly calculate the most efficient use of labor so as to lower costs, and maximize their profits. In Jesus' time the land owner would more likely have tried to take advantage as well as hire the fewest workers and then work them hard. And yet to the bemusement of Jesus' listeners, this owner carelessly and repeatedly hired more workers, and he does this for no other apparent reason than that these folks are idly hanging around the market with "nothing to do." When it comes time for the landowner to "settle accounts," this, soon to be out of business, businessman loses all control and pays every worker a full day's pay. This is patently ludicrous and not only does the pay scale have nothing to do with productivity, it clearly did not enhance employee morale. This vineyard owner was a preposterous and thus humorous character who had little in common with the ruthless task masters with whom many in Jesus' audience would have had to deal with.

Humor and exaggeration are effective components of good stories and so are surprise, frustration and ambiguity. We too are surprised when we learn that those who toiled all day received the same wage as those who came later. The conclusion of the parable is also upsetting and disturbing since it really doesn't seem fair. It also doesn't seem fair that they, according to the landowner, were deeply troubled, the owner, also had no right to complain! It's all there; humor, hyperbole, surprise and a reversal of expectations. It also has an unsatisfactory ending. Jesus ends with a question, a question that can be also aimed squarely at us. "Take your wage and get out!... Or is your eye filled with envy because I am generous?" Rather than leaving his crowd laughing at the silly vineyard owner Jesus ends with a sobering challenge- a challenge for the listener to reevaluate and consider carefully our view of God and our behavior.

So what is Jesus trying to get across here? Is he simply trying to give some not so sound business strategy? I doubt it? There is more and this brings me to the Matthew contradicting himself that I mentioned earlier. In Matthew 18 I said that Matthew could not leave Jesus' parable hanging unresolved and so to give it some needed closure he had to spell out what he felt was the meaning of the story. The only problem with that was, he got it wrong! But it may not have been Matthew's fault since his gospel was completed, by some editors much later, during a time of transition, a time during which the movement started by Jesus was becoming an organized religion of its own, separate from Pharisaical Judaism. Organizations, as we know, require structure and one key piece of any organizational structure is the defining of membership. Membership usually is determined by certain behaviors as well as affirmations and in the end, it is up to the institution to motivate its members to join and to "follow the rules." Now encouraging folks to forgive one other is of course never a bad thing, but not every motivational tactic is necessarily a good thing. The temptation to motivate by injecting a little "fear of the Lord," or in Matthew's case in chapter 18, the fear of a punishing and unforgiving God, is often too great. Fear is certainly an effective incentive, but it is not the way of Jesus or "heaven's imperial rule!"

So here's the contradiction. If for the sake of argument, substitute, say, forgiveness as the wages for toiling in God's vineyard, then today's story would lead us to believe that regardless of when we see the error of our ways then God forgives us. And if the landowner is God, then his behavior indicates that God's prevailing wage is both unconditional and non-negotiable. Also, (it gets better) this prevailing wage is not dependent upon the number of hours on the job, or how much we get done or even how efficient we are. Sooo.. what does this story tell us about the rule of God? Perhaps it has something to do with exaggerated searching and undeserving generosity? Perhaps "heaven's imperial rule," and those (like you and me) who want to be a part of it, is about a God and a community that is both indulgent in and generous with the unearned, undeserved, abundance of God! Perhaps its also a community that subverts the dominant culture by living an alternative lifestyle that reverses and frustrates the norms of that dominant culture. Bothers and sisters, what is more subversive than living out a world view that embraces joyfully the abundance of God while simultaneously rejecting both division and the fear of scarcity. My friends it is also a community that does not use threats or fear to motivate. Its about folks being good for goodness' sake. It's about a God who's generosity fills in all the gaps, even those gaps created by our mistakes!

Now I can think of many reasons why this is a good news, but I'll conclude by mentioning just one. The parable of the vineyard clearly exposes a tendency that I think is in all of us, and that is the feeling of entitlement. Now of course I'm guessing here, but I bet that all of us have felt at one time or another like we didn't

get what we deserved and that from time to time we still feel short changed or treated unfairly? Some of us may feel that we aren't paid enough? Or that we don't get the recognition or the appreciation that we deserve? And of course none of us gets the respect and the reciprocity that we truly deserve.

Of course I'm not saying that folks shouldn't seek basic respect and fair treatment. Rosa Parks did deserve to sit where ever she wanted to on that bus! Also Jesus did indicate in this parable that the owner paid "what is fair" and so we do need to advocate for what is just. But we must always ask ourselves the same question that the owner asks his grumbling workers, "Are you envious of my generosity?" Can envy keep me from basking in God's generosity? Can envy lead to grumbling and begin to separate me from others? Envy is always a cancer and a poison! Who among us has gotten what they deserve- were talking both the good the negative here folks? And do any of us truly get what we deserve from God?

Today's parable is a cautionary tale, so be careful of what you feel you deserve. Be cautious of what you expect and what you ask for! You may think you know what you deserve, but then miss out on the surprise ending that God is working on. Our ideas and dreams are actually quite limited and may even put limits on God! Our grumbling can spread infecting not only our souls but the lives of others. Think about it, do any of us really want what we deserve? Fortunately, like Matthew, we can make corrections. We can participate in, as well as, lose ourselves in the reversal of fortunes that is God's forgiveness- God's abundant, generous and undeserved acceptance! So don't grumble or demand what you deserve, rather, open yourself- open yourself to even more than that- to more than what you think you deserve. Open yourself unreservedly (and undeservedly?) to all that God wants to provide!