

September 20, 2020

Christ Episcopal Church, Dallas

Matthew 20:1-16

NO MATTER, FIRST OR LAST

Some scholars believe that the parable of the vineyard workers is so straightforward that it wraps up the whole Gospel into one story. That it reveals God's generous gift to all people.

It means that no matter when a person enters into the Kingdom of Heaven, late or soon, as a youth, or midlife, or when we are in our latter days, we are equally dear to God. The rabbis have a saying "Some enter the Kingdom in an hour; others hardly enter it in a lifetime."

No matter when we come to Christ, first or last, we are equally dear to Him.

In this parable we learn that the owner of the vineyard pays the same amount to those who worked all day as those who just worked one hour. They whine and complain to him that they did not get equal pay for equal work.

But the owner replies "Did I do you wrong? Did you not get what we agreed upon? Did I cheat you out of something? Take what's yours and go. I choose to give to this last group the same as I give to you."

And here is the punchline "Are you envious because I am generous?"

It is important to remember that Jesus is not speaking to religious leaders here, he is speaking to his followers. No matter how many times Jesus says it, the disciples can't seem to understand it. God is good. There's enough goodness to go around.

Jesus is teaching his disciples to take care in regards to jealousy and envy. These emotions pose a threat to one's health and the health of a community.

Jealousy or as Shakespeare calls it “the green-eyed monster” comes from a place of fear when we feel the threat of losing something or someone we hold precious. And envy comes from a place of longing and desire when we wish we had what someone else has. Frederick Buechner said “Envy is the consuming desire to have everybody else as unsuccessful as you are.”

Jealousy and envy threaten to weaken a relationship.

Left unguarded, jealousy and envy are destructive emotions that foster destructive behavior. No wonder they are considered Deadly Sins. We live in a culture of competition. We all know that. Jesus however tells us we need to live in mutuality – weeping together and rejoicing together.

Why is someone's goodness, like the land owner's, often the occasion for our anger or resentment? Interesting! Kierkegaard calls it the “sin of comparison.”

Comparing ourselves to others is a lose-lose game. There will always be someone better off, prettier, more handsome, richer, smarter, funnier, more athletic, more creative, a better singer, musician, a better parent, kinder, have a better marriage, have kids who don't get into trouble, better clothes, more shoes and so on and so on.

As member of the clergy, it's hard not to feel envious of large churches in a culture that values numbers as a measure of growth. Plus it seems like every mega-church started with 12 people in the pastor's living room but grew to 5,000 in three years!! WHAT REALLY??

So practically speaking how do we keep from being shackled by jealousy?

First admit that you are jealous or envious. It is important to be honest with yourself. Also tell someone about your feelings so you can get it out in the open and not dwell on it. Examine if your feelings are real, as opposed to what you

may have created in your head. And let go of past jealousies – holding on to jealousy is destructive - try to live in the present.

And here are some antidotes to jealousy and envy. Could it be possible that when we look at what others have gotten we are blind to what we have?

I think gratitude and rejoicing with others is an antidote. Like the psalms say “have a glad heart.” Sometimes we need to put blinders on and take seriously the call to the work God has given us – with the gifts God has given us. The whole point of work is the spirit in which it is done. It is not the amount of service given, but the love in which it is given which matters.

A person is not a Christian if his first concern is pay. The Christian works for the joy of serving God and his fellow man. That is why the first will be last and the last will be first. “It is a paradox of the Christian life that he who aims at reward loses it, and he who forgets reward finds it.”

Our God is a good and generous God and God’s kingdom of compassion and generosity is what Jesus expected of his disciples. When we know the God we serve, we’ll never be surprised that his grace is given out without reservation or hesitation.

Thanks be to God that we are on the receiving end of His generosity.

AMEN