EQUITY

September 20, 2020

"Are you envious because I am generous?" Matt.20:16

In Gaithersburg, Maryland – one of many middleclass and upper middleclass suburbs of our nation's capital – 7/11 grocery stores were the gathering point for day laborers. They began arriving between 4:30 and 5:00 o'clock each morning and waited for the landscape bosses to arrive in their pickup trucks. But even here there was an hierarchy. As each truck pulled in, those with greater stature – either stronger, healthier, or with some history with the boss – would leap quickly into the back of the truck before those slowed by inexperience, health, or indifference got a chance to claim a spot. As the morning wore on, only the less interested or less able laborers remained. Then, around noontime, some of those same trucks might return – having had only half-a-day's work for those early risers. They joined the throng on the pavement. Occasionally, other bosses would arrive later after a worksite had been prepared and further work needed now to be done by this unskilled group of laborers - mostly Latino, many undocumented, many living either on the streets, in shelters, or, if lucky, in one of the storage containers used by many landscape businesses for their equipment. As Interim Rector at Ascension Church in 2008-09, I had the privilege to work with the Diocesan Latino officer who spent much of his time helping this struggling community qualify for green cards, house and feed their families, and lead the Spanish language service at Ascension every Sunday morning.

But not everyone at Ascension - and not everyone in Gaithersburg – was excited about the ministry. Some saw the work as supporting a vagrant

population that led mostly to crime and sanitation issues – not to mention making a stop at 7/11 a more challenging prospect. Some didn't believe that undocumented, homeless, hungry people were welcome in their neighborhood. They saw the situation as mostly a drain on community resources and a policing nightmare..

The same was true of the tutoring program for high school students who had been suspended from the classroom for several days, or even weeks. Ascension was situated perfectly for the program, being just a block from the local high school. Teachers were willing to provide the lesson material, and the church had volunteers trained volunteers – many former teachers - who gathered every day to help those students stay current with their homework and classroom learning. Not everyone at Ascension agreed. During those 18-month the vestry battled with the program's director about her philosophy, and with Montgomery County – to meet the program's funding requirements. And yet, G Sharp, as it was called because it began in the basement of the G Street Baptist Church, is still an integral part of life at Ascension. And the church's membership has a large Latino following.

It's easy to say today that those are exactly the things we hope our churches are doing everywhere. It's easy to say that we need to have healthy Outreach budgets, that the church needs to be reaching out to its wider community. It's even easy to say that every life is of equal value and deserves to be treated with equal respect, love, and concern.

But today's Gospel takes us somewhere many of us fear to go. In the Parable of the Day Laborers, Jesus tells of something more than equal treatment

for those left behind in the parking lot at the 7/11. Those who only worked the last hour of the day are paid the same amount as those who worked from sunup to sundown, right through the heat of the day. I can imagine those preferred laborers who were taken in the first trucks thought they were in for a big payday when they reached the paymaster's table. They had something in common with a few folks at Ascension Church who questioned the work with the indigent community. Those who went early to the fields, those who went to work the landscape bosses at 5:30 in the morning - they all thought they deserved more, that they had earned a better place at the table. And in that respect, they shared a world view with some of the more tight-fisted members of Ascension – who thought none of them deserved the efforts being made. As it turns out, getting what we "deserve" may be the last thing on God's mind.

We are so used to comparing our circumstances with others. We are constantly defining and re-defining ourselves as being better, more "deserving" than some other group (and maybe not as good as another richer, smarter, more powerful group). But we will fight to keep our position in the line – just like those guys in the 7/11 parking lot. And, believe me, there were fights! But those fights, as public as they were, were little different than the fights we engage in to maintain our own place in the world. We just don't do it as publicly – most of the time.

We'd like to skip over this particular Gospel story. It doesn't fit very well with our economics. It makes us uneasy. Not just because it sounds unfair to us – that those who came late got an equal payday – but because it calls into question just how committed we are to creating a world in which everyone – everyone – is

of equal value. Just how far are we willing to go to put everyone on an equal footing in our society? What's "fair"? What's right? And what does God have to say?

As it turns out, none of us earns our place in line. By holy fiat, God declares that we are all God's beloved people. We are all God's favorite possession. We are, each and every one of us, persons of immeasurable worth who are meant for a place in God's kingdom. No exceptions, as Bishop John Chane used to say.

Growing up in the 1950's on a farm in Missouri, there were several levels of power – lines that were rarely crossed. There were the owners, then the foremen, then the farm hands and tenant farmers, and, finally, the day laborers. As an 8 year-old, member of the owner's family, I was paid a dollar-an-hour when I worked. Farm hands made $.65/hr, and those who picked cotton were paid 2-3 dollars for every hundred pounds of cotton. If they were really good pickers, they might pick a whole bale – 500 pounds – in a day-and-a-half. 5-10 dollars for two days hard labor. Cotton might be soft and fluffy, but the bolls are not…. There was no "fairness" or sense of equity, no thought of "equal pay for equal work", no effort to provide a "living wage". What God has always known is that every one of those farm workers made up a piece of the Kingdom, and without any one of them the Kingdom could not be complete. Every one of them was a priceless, invaluable member of God's household – worthy of equal consideration and of equal worth. Hard lessons for an 8-yr old who needed to buy his own baseball cards….

God is calling us to join in a wide embrace of all God's beloved children - no matter what color, what level if education, what level of ability or responsibility. We are all God's most favorite people. No exceptions. Amen.