

Proper 20 (A) September 21, 2014. Matthew 20:1-16

Our Thursday night Bible study class started back up this week, and I was happy to be able to attend. Near the beginning of the class, teacher and vestry-member Holly talked a little bit about the different approaches to reading the Bible, especially about the spectrum of beliefs about the Bible's inspiration: from "the Bible is a nice story" to "every word of the Bible was dictated by God." And it got me doing something that I normally try not to do: thinking about Christian fundamentalists and Creationists and so on.

And I think that I finally understood something about these silly debates between Creationists and scientists that you can find on youtube. I think that the root problem with these debates is that the Creationists want us to ask the question "How true is the Bible?" When in fact the question should be "How is the Bible true?" In my opinion, it is a dead end to try to measure up what quantity of scripture is true, even if you already know the answer to that and are going to plump for all of it. Instead, the approach that is most generative is to ask in what ways the Bible is speaking truth to us.

Today's gospel story is a fine illustration of one of the ways that the Bible most frequently speaks truth. The parable that Jesus tells is obviously not a historical story that should begin "on so and so day, in the town of so and so, the following happened." Or "I once knew a man who . . ." Nor, I think, is it a prescriptive instruction on how employers should treat their workers. That's helpful for us, because we don't really have categories for this kind of economics. It is certainly not trickle-down economics, but at the same time, I think it would be even more offensive to the unions than it is to the oligarchs.

No, I think that the way this passage is speaking truth to us is neither historical narrative, nor direct moral instruction, but by telling us something that is definitely true about human nature and about God. There can really be no doubt that the reaction of the workers in this story is a perfectly accurate diagnosis of what it is like to be human. Besides actual trauma, the really terrible life-altering stuff, is anything worse than the good fortune of other people?

Notice that the landowner honors his contract with the first laborers exactly. He promises them a day's wage, and they get precisely a day's wage. There can be no dispute there. But then he is flamboyantly, perhaps defiantly, generous to those who worked less. If the owner of the vineyard would rather pay everyone the same than do the calculations to prorate everyone's wages, all he has to do is pay the first workers first, and then go through the groups as the longer-serving laborers leave.

We will come back to why on earth the owner of the vineyard might have done things this way, but first let's pause and consider the reaction of the earliest workers. While we can all see that they got exactly what they were promised, does anyone here really think that their reaction is way out of line? I had a trivial experience this week immediately after I started thinking about today's sermon.

It's an experience with which most of you will be familiar. I was grocery shopping. And I had been standing in a long line for nearly ten minutes and was just getting near the front of the line when an employee of the store sweeps into the closed register next door, flips on her light, and invites the people behind me—who had just gotten in line a minute ago!!—to step over and checkout immediately. And oh, I burned. I had chosen my line; checking out took pretty much exactly the amount of time that I

expected it to. But oh, it bothered me that someone else was excused the eons of staring at the front page of the National Enquirer that I had to spend. It just wasn't fair!

This, as I say, is a trivial example. But it shows something to me that holds also through more serious situations. We are constantly making implicit, unspoken deals with the universe and other people based on the unassailable principle of fairness. Which is totally normal. But here's the rub: fairness is not the same as justice. Fairness says that everyone should be paid proportionally for the work they did. Justice says that everyone should have an opportunity to contribute gainfully to our community, and everyone should have a living wage.

Fairness says that if I have waited in line longer at the grocery store, I should get to checkout first. Justice is frankly unconcerned with how long a straight white guy waits in line at the grocery store. It asks whether there is fresh fruit at the grocery stores in the poorer parts of town, and whether the people who raise the fruit are treated with dignity, and whether the poor people can afford to buy it. The root motivation of justice is love; the root motivation of fairness, as our vineyard owner says, is envy.

Now it's probably too late for us to stop caring about fairness. It is too deeply ingrained in us, and rooting it out now would only court disaster, because others are always assuming implicit, unspoken deals of fairness with us. But we can beware of envy, that green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on. We can be vigilant, watching that our passion for fairness does not distract us from a passion for justice—that envy never trumps love in our lives.

The Bible tells us the truth about what it's like to be human, and I think that it's right that envy is at the root of complaints about fairness. But this story also tells us something true about God. I am thinking about this landowner. To me, he behaves strangely throughout the story, and not just at the time to pay up. Yes, he is very generous to the new workers at the end of the day. He shows, clearly, that his approach to rewarding faithful work differs from what we expect. But why he does things the way he does is still puzzling.

Now, this is a little speculative, but I have an idea that might help. His payment practices are strange, but so are his hiring practices. Every couple of hours he goes out and sees some folks unemployed, and each time he gives them a job. Notice that the text gives no indication at any point that he goes out to the field and realizes that the day's work won't get done without more workers. Instead, he just goes for a stroll, sees people looking for work, and hires them on the spot. I suggest that his motivation for hiring these workers is not the needs of the field, but the needs of the unemployed day laborers. His goal is not to make sure that his vineyard has enough workers, but to make sure that people have enough work and enough pay.

And this tells us something about how God interacts with us. It is sometimes a completely different paradigm. We are always looking at what work needs to get done, for the sake of the work. I think sometimes God requires things of us not because God needs this stuff to get done, but because we need to be doing it. Yes, a life in service to God will help the world, but it is also the best life that we can possibly have. Loving our awful neighbor, helping the poor, being generous to all in life—these things will make a little bit of difference in the world. But they will make all the difference in the world inside of us. My friends, there is always plenty of God's work to be done. And there is room in the field for all of us.