

A Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 20A
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This parable Jesus tells about the workers and their wages is kind of annoying, isn't it? I mean, it's not just the workers who were at it all day who feel there's something not right here – the whole thing just doesn't seem fair.

For those of us raised in what we sometimes call the Protestant Work Ethic, the idea that unequal efforts should have equal rewards seems to undermine the whole set of values that has made our country strong and prosperous, our lives peaceful and our children self-sufficient.

For some of us, thinking about this parable may also bring up memories of past unfairnesses inflicted upon us, when a parent or employer failed to recognize our efforts, or, even worse, rewarded a sibling or coworker for work that we had actually done. It just isn't fair.

And it's true that it isn't fair, and it wasn't fair, and, as I'm sure your parents told you on more than one occasion, life isn't always fair.

But this isn't a story about fairness.

It's a story about abundance.

It's a story about generosity.

It's a story about grace.

And it's a story about resurrection.

It might surprise you to know that this parable and not any of the stories of the empty tomb or the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus is the basis of the most famous Easter sermon of all time, written in the early fifth century and attributed to St. John Chrysostom. It is a sermon that is still read in Orthodox Churches every Easter morning, and since it's quite short, I'm going to give you the whole thing:

*Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!
Are there any who are grateful servants?
Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord!
Are there any weary with fasting?
Let them now receive their wages!
If any have toiled from the first hour,
let them receive their due reward;
If any have come after the third hour,
let him with gratitude join in the Feast!
And he that arrived after the sixth hour,
let him not doubt; for he too shall sustain no loss.
And if any delayed until the ninth hour,
let him not hesitate; but let him come too.
And he who arrived only at the eleventh hour,
let him not be afraid by reason of his delay.
For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour,
as well as to him that toiled from the first.
To this one He gives, and upon another He bestows.
He accepts the works as He greets the endeavor.
The deed He honors and the intention He commends.
Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!
First and last alike receive your reward;
rich and poor, rejoice together!
Sober and slothful, celebrate the day!
You that have kept the fast, and you that have not,
rejoice today for the Table is richly laden!
Feast royally on it, the calf is a fatted one.
Let no one go away hungry. Partake, all, of the cup of faith.*

*Enjoy all the riches of His goodness!
Let no one grieve at his poverty,
for the universal kingdom has been revealed.
Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again;
for forgiveness has risen from the grave.
Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed Hell when He descended into it.
He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh.
Isaiah foretold this when he said,
"You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.
Hell took a body, and discovered God.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.
O death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?
Christ is Risen, and you, O death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!
Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead;
for Christ having risen from the dead,
is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.
To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!*

That's all of it. Isn't it a wonder! And that, not fairness, is what God desires for us. It isn't a question of deserving, or who's first in line, though that was certainly a concern for Matthew's community, who would have heard the parable as a message about God welcoming Jews and gentiles alike. And that is in there, to be sure, but it is so much more than that.

In this one parable is the whole vision of the reign of God, where we are rewarded not according to our deserving but according to God's love. Think about it this way: supposing the day's wages on offer in the story had been, say, a billion dollars. Would anyone seriously propose, when they were paid at the end of the day, that a full day's work was more deserving of a billion dollars than an hour's work?

Of course not. It would be ridiculous. The person who worked an eight hour shift has no more earned a billion dollars than the latest of latecomers. But God has decided to reward all of us with treasure beyond price, just for showing up. Just for saying yes, just for loving God, no matter when and how we get there.

But the question that I want to raise, now that we understand a little bit more about God's ridiculous, unfair generosity, is what if we were to learn from God's example. What would our families, our communities, our churches look like if we were just as recklessly generous as God is?

Are we able to see past what we think people deserve, and offer our abundance and hospitality to all who show up? Could we imagine a life where the kind of love that God practices is also our practice –giving and forgiving freely, not based on others' ability to earn our generosity, but

solely on our ability to give? How would we, and the world be changed by the practice of that kind of love.

I want to leave you with one more quotation, my favorite one from Isaac of Nineveh, a seventh century Assyrian bishop. He said,

“Do not say that God is just...David may call him just and fair, but God’s own Son has revealed to us that God is before all things good and kind. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. How can you call God just when you read the parable of the laborers in the vineyard and their wages? ... Likewise how can you call God just when you read the parable of the prodigal son...? It is not someone else who has told us this about God so that we might have doubts. It is God’s own Son himself. He bore this witness to God. Where is God’s justice? Here in the fact that we were sinners and Christ died for us.”

(Quoted by Olivier Clement in *Roots of Christian Mysticism*, Theodore Berkeley, transl., New City Press, Hyde Park, NY, 1995)

Amen.