

Matthew 20:1-16^{vi}

Jesus told his disciples this parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

^v **About Matthew 20:1-16**

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is found only in Matthew. The point of the parable lies in the landowner's actions and is thus sometimes called the parable of the generous employer. The question "Are you envious because I am generous?" (v. 15) may be more literally translated "Is your eye evil because I am good?" An "evil eye" indicates a jealous, ungenerous, envious attitude.

Matthew has chosen to set the parable before the Zebedee brothers' question on precedence (20:20-27). Thus it stands as a reminder to disciples in the Church that the first may again become last if they grumble at the reward the Lord gives to others, even to latecomers. The strength of Jesus' message is found in his words about God's generosity. God, as supreme Judge, has the right to say "I grant mercy to whom I will."

^{vi} **Reflection and Response**

"No fair!" we whine when the immigrant gets elected mayor and the minority student wins the scholarship. When we read today's gospel we seethe like children cheated out of recess. Why are we so uncomfortable with this parable?

One reason for our discomfort may be our deeply ingrained North American work ethic. "By gum, I've earned it!" we crow, clinging to our treasured piece of the pie. Yet this same ethic is too rigid to admit the Spirit.

What we fail to recognize when we criticize the latecomers is how much we ourselves have received as gift. Perhaps Paul epitomizes this grateful spirit when he writes to the Philippians from prison. Never does he whine about life's unfairness, nor does he resent those who walk free outside the bars of his cell. Instead, he focuses on Christ's triumph: his personal fate is secondary to how Christ is exalted in him. In his perspective, dying loses its horror and can be seen as gain.

If we are still uncomfortable with the twist in the parable, we can recall times when we were figuratively hired last, yet still received full pay. At least once in our lives, we encountered a generous parent, teacher, spouse or employer who dismissed the categories, waived the rules and dealt with us as needy humans. If we are honest, we know we have squeaked around the deadline; we have been forgiven for unforgivable actions and words.

We need to be shaken by readings like those we encounter today. If Jesus' parable breaks the

shell of habit, disturbs our comfortable routines and redirects our way of thinking, then it has done its job and impelled us toward reform. As John Dominic Crossan says in *The Dark Interval*, parables “shatter the deep structure of our accepted world...remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God.” At that moment, we see how astonishing this God is.

Quietly consider: When have I been like the workers hired last and paid for a full day? When have I resented them?