

The Heavenly Vineyard

Matthew 19:30-20:16

September 18, 2011

I.

Children can be very perceptive. And as they grow and mature, we watch them go through phases where certain things or ideas are especially important.

My experience is that fairness is high on the list for many adolescents. How many times have we heard them say, "That's not fair?" And while sensitivity to fairness is not limited to young people, they are especially attuned to hypocrisy and falseness. Perhaps as we get older we become more inoculated to life.

And even as adults, we sense unfairness around us. Some people read today's Gospel in that way. We heard about the owner of a vineyard who, on five different occasions during the same day, went to the marketplace to hire people to work for him. As a result, some people put in a full day's work, some only worked for an hour, and there were others in between.

But at the end of the day they all received exactly the same wages no matter how long they worked. And that irritated the people who worked the longest. "Not fair," they complained. But the owner of the vineyard pointed out that the people hired first received the wages that were agreed, and it was his money anyway and he could do what he wanted.

What if this happened today? What if those who worked all day were women, and those who only worked an hour were men? Or suppose those who worked the longest were African-American or Hispanic, and those hired last were Caucasian? Could the employer get away with claiming it was his money and he could do what he wanted? Would the unhappy workers have a case?

And people find fault with other things, don't they? We already have touched upon unfairness and discrimination. We also hear complaints about the playing field not being level, or unfair advantages being taken. Our legal system uses complex regulatory schemes to prevent things like what was described in today's Gospel.

II.

Many preachers and theologians use this Gospel to underscore how our faith exists in tension with the unfairness of life. Or they point out that God's grace cannot be earned, and we have no right to expect God to reward us based on our work. We cannot make God indebted to us.

Or they might say we cannot understand God according to our standards. Conventional wisdom is something we invented; not God. And so when we expect God to behave as we think he should behave, we invariably are surprised or disappointed. God is God and we are not.

This reminds us of what God told the prophet, Isaiah. He said, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9).

This, of course, does not mean God is not fair and just. Righteousness and justice are attributes of God. But we can be a little self-centered. We often assess fairness from our perspective, not the perspective of others. That's what happened in today's Gospel. It focused on the grumbling of those who worked a full day, not the gratitude of those who worked an hour.

This means that if we believe this reading is a teaching on how God relates to us in this world, we also must defend an outcome that seems unfair according to our own understandings. And to

justify this seeming inequity we might quote from Proverbs, which says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding" (3:5).

But applying this story to contemporary life raises some difficult questions, doesn't it? If everything is linked to God's grace, does that mean we cannot count on God to reward us for the good things and hard work we do? If God does not recognize or respond to our efforts, and decides entirely on his own whether we will be rewarded, then why go the extra mile for him?

The answer is that living a Christian life and doing God's will brings its own rewards. We obviously cannot cut a deal with God and expect something in return as a *quid pro quo*, but we also know that God loves us and provides for us. We are the beneficiaries of his Creation, and the core of our relationship with him is our trust, our faith, that his way is the best way.

In addition, the Bible tells us God has plans for us (Jer. 29:11). That is plural; more than one plan. God certainly can make multiple plans that give us choices, and our choices can affect which of God's plans become reality. Better choices reveal better plans. And remember, God creates those plans through his grace. They exist, and our choices exist, because of him alone.

III.

Now, having said all that, here's the real answer. Today's Gospel actually does not apply to fairness and rewards in this life, even though many preachers talk about it that way. In fact, I just finished speaking of it in that way. But now I'm going to shift gears.

The true meaning of Jesus' words is elsewhere in the reading. Jesus presented this story as a parable that describes the kingdom of heaven, not life on earth. It was one of ten parables in Matthew's Gospel that used analogy and symbolism to describe the kingdom.

This means it was intended as a story with a larger theological meaning. Perhaps the actual events described in the story never happened in real life, which frequently was true of Jesus' parables. Jesus began this parable, as he did the other nine about the kingdom, by saying, "The kingdom of heaven *is like* something else. He used it as a teaching device to make a point.

And so, if this parable is not about fairness and rewards in this life, what's left? Is it about fairness and rewards in the next life in heaven? Is that the only alternative?

Well, let's briefly discuss that alternative. The Bible is clear that while we get to heaven by faith (Rom. 3:28), it also promises we will receive rewards in heaven based on what we have done on earth. Jesus said, also in Matthew's Gospel, "For the Son of Man will come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done" (16:27).

This is echoed in Romans, where Paul reaffirmed that God "will give to each person according to what he has done" (2:6)." And Second Corinthians reminds us, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (5:10).

Does this create an enigma? Today's Gospel proclaims equal rewards for people who work in the vineyard without regard to how long they worked there? How do we reconcile that with the idea we each will have different rewards in heaven? Perhaps there still is more to consider.

IV.

Let's look again at how this parable unfolded, and what the symbolism of the vineyard means. The landowner went to the marketplace first thing in the morning and hired people to work for him. It is likely that everyone there at the time had an opportunity to go to work because the landowner still needed more workers even after the first round of hiring.

So he went back later and hired more people. Perhaps people there the first time who did not go to work changed their minds and accepted the second offer. Perhaps others were not present when the landowner first appeared, but were there later. And this pattern likely applied to all the visits the landowner made to the marketplace.

We now can see some parallels. Accepting the landowner's offer to go to the vineyard is like accepting Jesus' offer that eventually gets us to heaven. Our Gospel actually is a story of salvation, and it tells us it is never too late. The result is the same no matter when we accept the offer that comes from what Christ did for us on the cross.

Thus, just as the workers who came to work early in the day and those who came late in the day were paid the same, we can come to Jesus early in life and be saved, or we can come to Jesus late in life and still be saved. We are in heaven either way. Salvation is not time sensitive until time expires.

But we cannot read this Gospel in a vacuum. Even though it is never too late to be saved and live forever in heaven, we also should return to the passages I quoted earlier that speak of our rewards after we get there. While believers all will get to heaven, we will not be in the same boat after we arrive. Remember, the Bible tells us we will be rewarded then for what we do now.

I previously have used this example to illustrate this point, so please bear with me. The Saints will play their home opener against the Bears in a few hours. I ask us to imagine that the Super Dome is heaven. And some people take that literally.

If we accept Jesus' offer and come to work for him as those workers did for the landowner, we are in the stadium that symbolizes heaven just as they were in the vineyard. That's the point of this story. The workers were paid the same no matter how long they worked. We will be in heaven no matter when we came to faith. Our faith is our ticket that gets us inside.

But there still is another question, isn't there? Although we made it inside this heavenly Super Dome, where are we going to sit? Will it be on the top row in the upper deck behind the end zone? Or will it be on the fifty yard line near the owner's box? Being in heaven will be wonderful no matter where we sit, but all seats are not the same.

This question could be developed more fully in another sermon, but I can summarize it by saying that the work we do now determines where we sit then. Our rewards after we get to heaven, as distinguished from the faith that gets us there in the first place, will be based on the works of our lives in this earthly realm.

V.

I am going to accept that you all have already asked Jesus to come into your lives. I pray and believe that you all are saved. If you have doubts about that, please come and see me or speak with someone who can help.

But I would like to reiterate two points. First, we cannot make God owe us anything now. Whatever we receive from God is by his grace. But we trust in God's love for us and his plans for us, and we believe the choices we make can affect which of God's plans become reality.

Second, while the Bible proclaims our reliance on God's grace in this world, it also promises that if we accept Jesus as our Savior now, we will receive divine rewards in heaven later. And those rewards will be based on the content of our lives now and in the future.

So, I pray that we love God, honor him, go to work for him, toil in his vineyard. He knows what we need even better than we do. Trust in him and it will be given to us. *Amen.*