

September 18, 2011

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

Friends, I have terrible news:
It's not about you.

The kingdom of heaven, I mean. And the Gospel. And, for that matter, the church. It's not about you.

There's a lot of talk about this Gospel, and rightfully so. It is a difficult one. Much of the discussion centers on whether or not it is fair. In this parable, it is assumed that we, the people of God, are the laborers. The landowner is God, doling out equal portions to those who show up early and those who come late.

The spilled ink often deals with whether or not this scenario is fair and whether or not it matters if it is fair and whether or not the point is that it is NOT fair and whether or not it is okay that God is not fair.

We workers like our fair wages after all. You get what you work for. If you love God all of your life, toil and labor to make the world a better place and raise your kids to be good citizens of the kingdom, you deserve more than those Johnny-come-lately folk who either purposefully or ignorantly delay right living until the very last minute.

We know the *right* answer is that God's distribution of grace is blind to merit. We know that God offers love in gracious abundance and that the Kingdom of God is no place for punching a time card or gold-star stickers. But secretly—and sometimes not-so-secretly—this makes us really mad. Righteously indignant, perhaps. We want to be rewarded for our work, loved according to our ability and willingness to contribute. Our value, we have always been told, is based on our production. And secretly we wish it were so in Kingdom of Heaven.

This is the Prodigal Son tale of Matthew's gospel. Twisty and difficult and unfair. And, because we are human beings who like to see our own reflections in just about everything, we go straight to the laborers to measure ourselves up: Am I like the first chosen, similar to the older brother: arriving early, working hard, indignant afterward? Am I closer to the last group called, like the prodigal younger brother: embarrassed, maybe ashamed to arrive so late to the game, thrilled to be equally compensated?

It is natural to look for ourselves in the parables, to figure out where we fit in the kingdom. But back to that terrible news I mentioned earlier:

It is NOT about us.

This parable is about God.

If we change the way we are looking here at this story and, rather than looking for our own reflection, we look for an image of God, we will see a truth more profound than fairness and desert.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard, more properly called the parable of the landowner, reminds us, just like the parable of the loving father, that our rules simply do not apply in the kingdom of God. There is no fair and unfair. There is no deserving or too late or better or lazy. There is only God.

That which God gives us: grace, forgiveness, abundant and abiding love, these are not things that we earn with hours of backbreaking work in the scorching heat of the vineyard.

That is a good thing, too. Because even at our very best, there is nothing we can do that will merit that grace. Nothing we can do to earn our forgiveness. Nothing we can do to be good enough for that love.

These things that God gives us are given freely, undeservedly. As abundant as the waters of baptism and as readily available. We can't earn it but we also can't lose it. But human standards, it isn't fair. But, our parable reminds us, luckily for us, broken yet beloved, the Kingdom of Heaven does not run on human standards.

So why bother? The work is hard, we can't earn God's love and it won't be taken away. Why risk the sunburn and chipped nails, the sore back or the broken heart?

Precisely because we are so loved. Now that I know about that love so deep, so wide, I have no choice but to proclaim it in word and in deed. There is no way I can work hard enough or long enough to earn it, but I can respond to God with my voice, my hands and my feet in gratitude and in humility. I can work to make the kingdom of earth a better place, to make it a place where everyone knows themselves deeply loved and forgiven as I do.

Those of us who know about that grace, who understand the love, well, we can't help but try. We can't help but to answer the outpouring of that love from God in the bumbling and inadequate ways that we know how: we love back.

That is why, again, it is not about you or me. This parable is about God and the abundance God gives, unbidden.

This community, it isn't about you either, or your needs or what you deserve. This community is about God and about responding to the Gospel in our thoughts and prayers, words and actions, together. It is about being a people grateful and humble enough to give and give and give without seeking reward. It is about reorienting our lives, individually and together, just as we reoriented our look at this parable, away from our own reflections, toward God and the needs of a hurting world.