

Matthew 20: 1-16
September 21, 2014
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

The one continuous message of the entire Bible is this: When we take our eyes off of the greatness and wonder of God we get into trouble.

In the book of Exodus we read that almost immediately after God parted the waters of the Red Sea, led the Israelites across the parted waters on dry land and closed the waters upon the Egyptian army, they started to complain. They became more impressed with the lack of food than the power of God to deliver.

The apostle Paul is continually amazed and discouraged by the fact that soon after he leaves a congregation they take their eyes off of the Gospel and begin to quarrel. Paul's consistent message is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so vast that it renders all differences inconsequential.

In the parable we hear today from Jesus the workers in the fields are content until they take their eyes off of the gift of work and their gratitude for a job and compare themselves with workers who came later and who were paid the same wage. "It isn't fair!" they cry! "We deserve more! We worked harder and longer! We bore the heat of the day! They file a complaint for unjust labor practices.

Suddenly a job which they were glad, maybe feeling fortunate to do has become an experience of injustice and a source of resentment and jealousy.

Lest you think I am justifying the good old days when labor was unprotected and women and children were working for next to nothing in dangerous and unhealthy conditions—

something that continues in countries which provide us with inexpensive clothes and other consumer goods, I am not. Even in this country there is such inequality of wages that people work full time and choose between a place to live and eating. Heaven forbid that they or their children get sick. The grinding despair of people condemned to choose the so-called noble life of the working world where they cannot sustain their lives and that of welfare where they receive basic benefits but are vilified as parasites is the great shadow spreading behind our proud economic system. This is a subject for another time.

Instead, Jesus places the parable in the context of one of his favorite phrases: “The kingdom of heaven is like...” For Jesus, the phrases “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God” are interchangeable. For Jesus the kingdom of heaven has nothing to do with pie in the sky when we die. It is a reality seeking to become known right here right now. We recognize this every time we pray the prayer he taught us: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.

So how do we respond to the parable of the workers in the field and their relationship with the owner who employed them? How is this a parable of the kingdom?

Clearly the values of the owner are not the values of the first workers who accepted the days wage and were happy to work at that rate. And it must be said that these workers are not bad people. They are good and faithful workers. They work hard in the owner’s fields. They are grateful when more workers come at various times of the day. After all the harvest is great and the laborers are few. Many hands make light work. How does such a happy picture go so wrong?

It happens at payday. The workers who came at the beginning of the day are content to receive the day's wage. But when the laborers are paid what *they* were promised, they get excited. "Man if those guys get what we signed up for how much more we will get when the owner comes to pay us! He will surely recognize our faithful and hard work and honor us in front of the others by paying us more."

This is the precise moment when the original workers take their eyes off of the inherent worth of what they were doing and start to calculate what they deserve. Suddenly they have expectations which are soon disappointed. Not only do they now feel resentful of the workers who came later, they resent the owner who paid them the wage. We can hear them grumbling, "Heck tomorrow I will sleep in. I'll show up mid-afternoon and work for an hour or two. Why come out early and bust my hinder and only get the same as everyone else!"

Notice that the importance of the work has become completely lost. It is now all about me and what I deserve. I have forgotten the owner of the field did not give me a job so I could earn money. He gave me the job because he wanted something *done*. I receive my wage because I am helping the owner accomplish his purpose.

In the worldly world this is a common and sometimes justifiable response. But Jesus is not talking about the worldly world. He is talking about the kingdom of heaven—what Barbara Brown Taylor calls, "The *really real world*." According to Jesus in the kingdom of heaven we are so consumed with love and gratitude to God we have no room in our lives for comparing our lives with the lives of others. In the kingdom of God we are so amazed at the glory of the Creator and the Creation that we feel thankful simply to be alive and to lead lives which are windows for the light of Divine love. In the kingdom we follow Jesus and keep our eyes on him

and his pattern of life and we unselfconsciously and spontaneously seek to share our thankfulness for the peace and generosity of God in our daily lives. Having accepted the gift of faith and the grace of Jesus Christ we have received all the “payment” we could ever desire. Therefore we are delighted when, at whatever stage of life people come and join us. Why? Because in the kingdom of God we are spiritual billionaires. The lord is our shepherd we have more than everything we need.

In short, in the kingdom there is no little voice that always cries out, “What about me?” It is *that voice that is the culprit which takes our eyes off of God and which leads us into resentment and jealousy, that is spiritual trouble.* Freedom from that voice is freedom indeed! Amen.