

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

GOD, THE EQUALIZER

Matthew 20:1-16

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6And 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?' 7They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' 8When 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.' 9When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, '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.' 13But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and

go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

DIAGNOSIS: The First Become Last

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *To Become First, You Have to Follow the Rules*

In any normal power system, those in power control motivate the desired outcomes by granting jobs, wages, perks, access and influence. Those who do the work required get the rewards, and those who do more of the work or do it more enthusiastically or do it better in some way get more of the rewards. So, when Jesus starts telling a story comparing God's reign to the dynamics of a landowner with the laborers in his vineyard, everyone knows what to expect, including the characters in the story: Those who work longer and harder for the boss will receive more from the boss at the end of the day. The problem is that in this parable, they don't. This boss gives everyone the same pay no matter how long, how hard, or under what conditions they have worked. They all get a full day's wage. We are not told the reaction of those who worked only one hour upon receiving twelve times an hour's wage. Perhaps, with the psalmist they sang, "The Lord is gracious and merciful..." (Psalm 145:8). But we hear those who worked all day complain at the unfairness of being paid the same daily wage as those who worked only the last hour. From the attention he gives to these workers' thoughts it seems that Matthew expects his hearers to share their reaction.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *One Can't Be First and Equal*

In the parable, the divine ruler has to explain the way of the

domain to the workers, who are accustomed to another way of doing things. God wants everyone to be equal. But this is irksome and frustrating to the workers who express our thoughts. We want to be recognized for our achievements. What does a reward mean if everyone gets it whether they deserve it or not? If everyone gets an A in school, we know there is serious grade inflation going on. The marks likely don't reflect the merits. We want to be credited properly for our merits and we want to be distinguished from those who lack these merits.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *To God, If You Won't Be Equal, You Must Be Last*

So it seems that God is grossly unfair if this story describes what "the kingdom of heaven is like..." (Matthew 20:1). As the one in power, what is it that God values? What is God promoting by this system? God's goal seems to be simply to get people into the vineyard. God reminds us that it is God's vineyard after all, and we do not set the rules for God. The Lord asks, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). Literally this last question translates: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" To demand that God reign by punishing and rewarding in the way that the world's powers do, is to look at God through an evil eye. It makes us like Jonah, angry because God spared the town of Nineveh but did not spare the bush that shaded Jonah as he sat waiting in vain to see God strike down the Ninevites (Jonah 3:10-4:11). God does not think highly of our standards of fairness that leave so many behind, lagging last, while those first get so much. Those of us who aspire to being first want God to follow the Law, but God is turning the tables. In God's kingdom those who want to be first are made last.

PROGNOSIS: The Last Become First

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Joins The*

Last And Is Made First

Jesus is hard at work in the vineyard as he tells this story, yet the powers of this world will not only not reward Jesus for his labor, they will punish and kill him for his labor because his goals and values as the firstborn of God are in opposition to theirs. Matthew follows this parable immediately with a discussion of Jesus' impending death by execution (Matthew 20:17-19). The first becomes last. But here God promises to make the last first. So, God raises Jesus from among the dead and makes him Lord of the vineyard. God is like this, righteous and "abounding in steadfast love" (Psalm 145:7-8), as those who were last hired know, and God keeps promises. While the day-long workers are thinking they would rather work for someone else, someone more just, the landowner calls one of them "friend" and says, "I am doing you no wrong" (Matthew 20:13). The workers hired first thing in the morning are not cheated, but in the end they receive what the Lord agreed to pay them before they even did a minute of work. The wages are not keyed to their work but to God's graciousness.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Jesus Shares His Life and Labor with Us

Perhaps they really would not want to work for someone else. And perhaps it is not so enviable standing unemployed all day because no one will hire you. Is it not good to work for someone who cares both about those working and those not working? Besides, look what company you have in the vineyard: each other and Christ himself! In fact, Paul tells the Philippians that "living is Christ," and that it is "fruitful labor for me," especially since it means that "I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus..." (Philippians 1:21-22 and 26). It is Christ's labor that we carry on in the vineyard of God's reign, and it is a labor of gathering people out of the tyrannies of this world into the reign of God. There is no need to begrudge

anyone their gift from God. The more, the merrier.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Together We Enjoy God's Home and Heritage*

At the same time, however, those engaged in the work of Jesus can expect to face much opposition, just as Jesus did. Some of this opposition is internal and some of it is external. But just as Jesus shared our struggles and death under the powers of this world, so he also gives us all a share in his resurrection. When the Lord of the vineyard pays the workers, he does not say, "Take what is mine," but "Take what is yours" (Matthew 20:14). For those who work in God's vineyard, everything God has is theirs. When God speaks Spanish, God says, "Mi casa es tu casa" ("My house is your house"). That's what "the kingdom of heaven is like" (Matthew 20:1).