

SERMON – SEPTUAGESIMA – 8 FEBRUARY 2009
St. John’s Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Epis. I Cor. 9:24

Gp. Matt. 20:1-16

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen+

Ernst Kasemann, the German NT Scholar, told this story of a small Reformed Church in the Netherlands. It seems that one Sunday morning following a week of very stormy weather, the town leaders show up just before worship to beg for help in stacking sand bags at one of the dikes that held back the North Sea. It had begun to leak under the pressure of unusually high tides, and a break in the wall would inundate the little town and destroy property on a major scale. In the midst of the crisis they did what any self respecting parish would do and called a committee meeting!! Considerable discussion ensued about the situation and what should be done. The pastor suggested cancelling or at least postponing the morning service so the members could assist. One senior gentleman of the consistory shook his head and said, “well now I am not too sure about that. After all it is the Sabbath and we should keep it holy!!” Others felt that a brief delay would not be impious. Again the elder stated that perhaps if the Lord really wants that sea wall to hold He will do something to make it happen. Time being of the essence the young pastor reminded them that Jesus himself had picked grain on this day and had said, “Remember, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath”. The gentlemen in question replied, “I have had a troubling feeling for many years, but have never openly stated it. Frankly, I think our Lord Jesus may have been just a bit too much of a liberal!!”

We, of course, can chuckle at stories like this because we stand at a distance from them where they are not yet personal, and we can see the foibles and frailties of others more readily from that standpoint. The concern of the gentleman in this story is not far at all from the workers in the vineyard from the text this morning. They have come to work ALL day in the heat for a certain return, and when they get to the owner of the vineyard for their pay they find those who have come in the cool of the very late afternoon are getting the same coinage they are receiving. What troubles the laborers is that this seems

to work in a way that ignores or stands outside their sense of justice or at least fairness. I wonder; do they give voice to what concerns us, too?

We hear today the core of the Gospel imbedded in this remarkable parable, “**Am I not free to do as I wish with what is mine?**” And then in the very next phrase to make the message more potent, the Greek is very strong for literally translated it says, “Is your eye evil because of my generosity?” Are you jealous because I have treated others with the same care I give you? I have to tell you that I laughed last Monday evening as I first read the parable. In a day of equal opportunity employment, worker’s rights, and a jungle of federal regulations, I could not help but wonder what would happen to the owner of the vineyard today!! Even more amusing, at least at that moment, was the vision of my staff’s response to finding out that someone working 1 hour received the same pay as another on a full shift!! Can you say “uprising”.

The parable does do something to us, doesn’t it? If you put yourself in the place of those who have struggled all day among grapes, or in our context, all their lives to be good, honest, kind, truthful, and faithful people, what does the punch line of this text bring out in you? I must confess to you that I respond very differently if I am the one receiving equal treatment for disproportionate effort compared to those whose struggles have been far greater. How many of us here who have been around children, adolescents, or even some adults have not heard that phrase, “but that isn’t fair”, when confronting life’s mysterious challenges and rewards? There does seem to be ingrained in our psyches a resistance to injustice towards ourselves, and a naïve expectation that life at least *should* be fair, even if it is not. And for those in our midst who have had a share in tragedy and loss that sense may be even more keen and sharp. Jesus’ own words that his Father causes it to rain on both the just and unjust is certainly true, but do we not really from time to time wish that it was otherwise? This Gospel confronts us with one of the nagging problems within the Christian life; how do we deal with the imbalance and often skewed things that come our way on the one hand, while having faith in God on the other? And in ways that we may find embarrassing, it shows how we cling to our world’s definition of fairness and justice.

The real and lasting Word of God in the parable is that it brings us face to face with another world. It is one that lies just beneath the surface of everyday life and yet is

constantly at work in our midst. It is the world as seen and treated through the grace and mercy of God. One of the great affronts to us is to learn that we are not the center of the universe, or even our own neighborhood. A second challenge is found in God's unfathomable ways which sometimes seem to us almost as nonsense. Who among us would choose to be present to each other in bread and wine? What person in our midst would want to be loved and yet remain hidden from the eyes of the beloved? What parent here would select to give the world hope by sacrificing a son or daughter for those who treat them as if they did not exist? This may seem nonsense, but it is the world and work of the Father, the keeper of the Great Vineyard. Our parable this morning brings us face to face with the very nature of God, the one to whom we turn daily in prayer. It interjects into consciousness, thought, and soul a new reality which is the deepest, gentlest, and yet most powerful of God's traits; His Grace. Sometimes fairness does not enter into the ways of God. There is an inherent unfairness in the notion of Grace, because it goes beyond trying to find a balance between what we deserve on the one hand and what we are freely given on the other.

When you read or hear this parable what comes to mind? Do you consider the point of view of those "hard-working" souls? Or do you think, "Ah, those late comers are lucky stiff's"? I would like to ask you to reflect on the **owner** of the vineyard, and his character. What is at the heart of his action? Is it to prove a point to the overly conscientious, or to toss a bone to the late comers? Neither. Maybe it is to show that at the heart and soul of life is a generosity that goes far beyond what we can either imagine or than we deserve. For the Christian this unearned credit is Grace. *It is the decisive action of God in overcoming for us our bondage to sin and death, which we could not possibly have done for ourselves.* No amount of self-effort can achieve it. To attempt that will only lead to despair. Instead God grants it out His very being, embodies it in Jesus of Nazareth, gives it to us in the Eucharist as a palpable presence, and lives it out in the life of His Body, the Church.

Once that gift is given and received it creates a new person, and a new situation for us. We are no longer bound by our past, whatever may be lurking in there. And even though it may reach out from time to time to pull us back, God's choice in the matter has been made. His liberality, which is merely a by-product of His love for us is how He has

chosen to treat us. The parable challenges us also. It asks us to see if we can have joy over the grace given to others that we have for that which is poured out on us. Perhaps this is a measure of how deeply we are grateful for what God has done for us. What is it worth to you and me to know that God loves us enough to see past our brokenness and to envision and create what we can be?

There is a story about a person who was so weighed down by mistakes, hurts, and failures that they could not seem to get relief. Finally, in abject desperation, which is often a motivating factor in prayer, this person turned to God and unloaded all the frustration, anger, and guilt bottled inside. Like so many who confess, once the relief is a day old, there comes that sense that maybe they had revealed a bit too much. Then one day they encountered a man who as fate would have it turned out to be Jesus. He introduced himself and in return so did this individual. The penitent in chagrin said, “I have heard you have an unshakeable memory, and recall everything, is that true”? Pretty much came the response. Well, said this individual, I hope you won’t hold all my stuff against me. What stuff, asked Jesus. Oh, you know all those things I said that day when I was so hurt. Jesus replied, I don’t remember!! That is what we call Grace. The reality that God is free to give us what He knows we need, not what we deserve. Am I not free to do what I will with what belongs to me? That includes us for we are His. Amen.+