

God Can't Make Change

Text: St. Matthew 20:1-16

If one had to say in a word what this morning's Gospel parable, the parable of the workers in the vineyard, is about, one might simply say that it is about religious envy. Now, to put it that way, and to put it that baldly, is to put forth an idea that doesn't seem to make much sense at first. If, for example, I really envied somebody else their beliefs, if I thought that their beliefs were actually superior and *truer* than mine, I would, in fact, have those beliefs deep down.

Aside, however, from this extreme way of taking the phrase, religious envy is possible. It is possible to envy *aspects* of what other religions believe and do while still holding, in the main, to your own. As children, for example, we Christians envied the Jewish kids in our class the eight days of Hanukkah. We only had one day of gift giving with Christmas. Catholic teenagers without youth groups may well envy the Presbyterians their ski trips. Presbyterians and Episcopalians, who used to be the religious leaders in American culture, may well envy the evangelicals who not only draw bigger crowds, but even manage to constitute a voting block that candidates always seem to want to court. It has been a long time since a presidential candidate has worried about what *we* think.

But religious envy also plays out in some other ways as well, some pretty serious ones. Think, for example, about Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. I mean here not the part where the prodigal son returns and is forgiven and welcomed back by his father, but the part where the older brother, who has been faithfully serving his father without a break, gets upset at what he thinks is unfair treatment. The prodigal, even though he was a loser in life, got a party, and the older son didn't get the credit *he* was due. *That* part of the parable is truly a story about envy. And it is one particularly about religious envy if what scholars tell us is true. That is to say, it

may well be that in its original telling, the younger son represents the Gentiles who were coming into the early church without having followed the Torah, and the older son represents the Jews who had kept the Torah since the time of Moses. If so, one can see that this is a pretty serious issue. It is a very good set of questions, indeed: How *can* you let these people in, and how can you let them lead, and how can you push aside those with far longer good standing in God's covenant? How can you treat them equally when their preparation and readiness is not at all equal? Envy and resentment, indeed, seems justified. This particularly seems to be the case when the new people want to change things.

The same questions are raised by this morning's parable. A man goes out early in the morning and hires workers for his vineyard. It is not a hard notion for us to grasp, since throughout this country every morning bosses go out to the Latino Labor Exchanges located in the parking lots of 7-11s, and Walmarts to find day labor. The boss promises them a fair day's wage, puts them in the back of his pickup and takes them to the job site. But clearly he has a lot of work that needs doing, and so he goes back several times during the day and hires a new batch of workers, each time promising them a fair day's wages. In fact, he even picks up a group at five o'clock in the evening when there aren't a lot of daylight hours left. When the end of the day finally comes, he calls all of the workers together and begins to pay them, beginning with the ones hired at five o'clock. To everybody's amazement he gives them the usual full day's wages. And as he then goes down the line, he pays everybody the same thing, no matter what time they began working. Understandably, the ones hired first, and who had worked in the sun all day, are envious of what the ones who came later got, since they had to put in a lot less effort in getting it.

Clearly envy is the point of this parable. Jesus even tells it with a certain dramatic flair to make envy the highlighted point. By having the last to come get paid first, he increases the

anticipation of those who came later – and of the reader who always seems to side with them. Everyone thinks that the ones who came first will receive something more. Watching the early comers get paid, and knowing that it is Jesus the Good who is telling the story, they think the boss in question must be extremely generous. Their disappointment and their envy of their compadres is surely heightened by having to wait until the end to find out that they all get the same.

So envy is the point of the parable. And it is an important point with timeless application, because this sort of envy happens all the time in religious communities, including, and indeed perhaps even especially, Christian communities. It happened in the first century between Jews and Gentiles, as the Jews had been laboring in the vineyard since Abraham, and the Gentiles seemed to have just waltzed in at the end of the day and gotten all the privileges of membership without having worked nearly as long. It happens today, as Christians in Europe and North America hold their noses at the conservative and even superstitious theologies of third world Christianity, even though it is growing exponentially and first and second world Christianity is not, although we are very *sophisticated*. Simply think here of the recent controversies in the Episcopal church as bishops in growing churches in Africa have been lecturing Americans on how to do it. Perhaps that hasn't excited envy exactly, but it sure has bred a lot of resentment. Or think simply about the rather common phenomenon in any number of local churches when the old leadership tries to stifle the input of new members. In one church I served, one old member, a man in his sixties who had been a member since childhood, usually prefaced and bolstered any argument for any position *he* took by first pointing out to the newcomers that these were things they certainly couldn't understand because they were, well, new. Here he tended to include members who had been there twenty-five years and even more, and who had served on session

numerous times. Clearly, he didn't think their ideas and service should be paid the same amount of respect as his, and it bothered him when they were.

And yet, despite the principle of equal pay for equal work, God pays all of them, God pays all of us, the same. What is going on here?

It was a philosopher of the twentieth century who cut through all the grease of subtle scholarly explanations on this passage when she simply remarked: "God doesn't make change." That is to say, God only has one currency to hand out, and so it never could make a difference what time you started to work. God inevitably was going to pay you the same as everybody else.

And when you think about the currency that God uses, you will realize that this is quite true. For what is it that God gives us for working in his vineyard? Nothing but his unconditional acceptance and love and friendship, nothing but his grace. He draws us into his own life unconditionally. And, of course, unconditional acceptance and love aren't, well, conditional. Grace is gracious, what it conveys to us is free and unmerited. It is not something that can be parceled out, particularly on the basis of what *we* think we are worth. In this regard, because God doesn't make change, God also doesn't shortchange anybody on the gifts he gives. Just as a teenager, or any other woman, can't be just a little bit pregnant, you can't be just a little bit baptized. You may not have gotten it right quite yet, of course, and it may not have fully dawned on you all that God's gift means, you may not be living it fully yet, but that is not because God gave you less. What God has to give, God gives equally. You are no less a child of God for being the youngest.

That means two things for the way that we live out the Christian faith, for the way that we work in the vineyard, as it were. First, and most obviously, it means that we need to look at other people around us and recognize that there is as much light in them as there is in us. I used to tell

seminary students that while they well might be the best religiously educated people in the churches they serve, they were also going to do a lot of learning, if they were able to listen. What they were going to witness in individual parishes was the real live playing out of the story of the widow's mite, as people gave to the church sacrificially. These pastors-to-be were going to see people who got no financial or social reward out of doing so but nevertheless gave their time and energy to the truth; first, because God called them to it, and second, because they knew there was nothing more important than serving the children of light. They were also going to see people who lived lives that were sorely tested and, yet, whose faith never wavered, whose confidence that God wants us to be part of his life and that God is good saw them through any number of evils. And I told them that if they were really as smart as they thought they were they needed to know that their own faith would stay alive because of the living witness of all of those who knew a lot less than they did. I said that based on experience. But as a side note, I also have to say that should a minister end up in a church where there aren't people like that, his or her faith will be mightily tested. A lot of ministers in situations like that do lose their faith, or try to regain it by going into social work or anywhere *but* the parish. For that reason, and simply to save their own souls, seminary students need to go out and not just be smart and educated, but to see the light in others and to make very sure that they do everything they can to make sure that those lights don't get hidden under a bushel. Their own faith may depend on it. Congregations need to take that seriously, too, in their dealings with their ministers.

The second thing that God's not making change means is this: that if God doesn't make change, we shouldn't, either. We can't divide up our lives or work in the vineyard, counting on God's grace. Let me suggest my own allegory here to make the point. When I was in high school, I worked at the local drugstore, doing deliveries, sweeping and manning the counter. Now, the

store's schedule had me working every other weekend. As I did so, I noticed a peculiar phenomenon. On Sunday mornings, and it was mornings before 11:00am only, any number of people would come in and buy nothing more than a newspaper or a pack of gum, and pay for it with a twenty dollar bill. And understand that in 1967 the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* Sunday edition cost a quarter; it was no modern day *New York Times* at \$4.50 a pop. The other delivery boy who worked in the store clued me in as to why this kept happening. Nobody, he said, wanted to be caught in church when the plate was passed with nothing smaller than a twenty. They were coming in to get change so that they could drop just a buck in the plate.

Now, it seems that that is an allegory for the way that a lot of people think about labor in the vineyard, especially after they figure that God doesn't make change. If they are going to get the same, then why shouldn't they make change, put in just a little of themselves, and then expect that they will get the whole day's wage? In the ancient church, when it was fully expected that one would commit no sins after baptism, a lot of people, thinking just like this, put baptism off until they were on their death beds. They fully expected all the love, and wanted to get a deal on it with no real love of their own.

That way of thinking isn't clever; it just plain fails to get what working in the vineyard means. If God doesn't make change, then we shouldn't either. There is, after all, a big difference in being a latecomer to the vineyard, and not laboring at all. And those who are continually making change, giving a buck to God and their neighbors, and eighteen dollars and seventy five cents and a *Pioneer Press* to themselves haven't gotten it. They have *yet* to be workers in the vineyard; they're not even latecomers. Why? Because just as God's acceptance of us, and love for us is never half-hearted, nor divided between us and something else on God's mind, so, too, our laboring for God is only laboring for God when it tells all, and not only half of the Gospel,

and when it listens fully, not half-heartedly, to the world's pain. The life of faith cannot be what ladies and gentlemen of leisure do in their spare time; like the God it serves, the life of faith is a life of sacrifice. It doesn't matter when you come to it, but it does matter that you do come to it.

Next week, the Stewardship Committee is sponsoring a Time and Talents Fair after church. All around the Georgetown Room are going to be booths displaying the numerous activities and committees of the church. In a word, you are going to see God's vineyard as it exists at Georgetown Presbyterian Church. It is not something to look at the way you look at a museum. It is an opportunity to serve others, and to claim the full day's wages that God means to pay you. Friends, take that opportunity, and don't make change with it. Why? Because the God who brought you here didn't make change when he gave you life and light.