

Ordinary 25A - September 24, 2017

Vineyard Work

Art and Faith by Lynn Miller

Jesus tells the story of a vineyard owner who pays wages by the person rather than by the hour.

In the parable, four different groups of workers are hired, and the group hired last - just before quitting time - is paid the same wages as the group that started work at sunup. Is that fair? No, according to the early bird workers.

The early workers, the older brother from the prodigal son story...probably most of us can understand how it feels to have given everything you had, done everything you thought was right only to find yourself on what you perceive as the unfair end of the deal. However, most of us have also probably been the recipient of some grace along the way.

However, all the workers were unworthy of their Lord's generosity. Those who came late in the day were unworthy because they really didn't earn their pay. Those who worked all day are unworthy because they were dissatisfied with what God gave them. At the heart of the story is the truth that both sets of workers are dependent on the goodness and generosity of the Lord.

Jealousy, the green-eyed monster, is one of the most pervasive and destructive vices. It is not a monopoly of any group. Recently, I was able to arrange for some trustee prisoners to work on a construction job so as to be able to earn something to help their families. Within a few days the Governor got a phone call complaining about their being allowed to work outside the prison. It later transpired that the call was made by another prisoner who was jealous of them.

However, jealousy is especially the vice of so called 'good people.' They do not indulge in stealing or killing or sexual misbehavior, so they think that they are deserving of special stroking from the Lord. They become very sensitive to who is and who is not getting that stroking.

A loving and sacrificing daughter is looking after her old mother. On Christmas day her mother will not eat as she waits for a phone call from another daughter who is married in the United States. The daughter caring for her mother gets madly jealous that her mother gives such importance to the other daughter who has had the best of everything in life, as she sees it, while she has sacrificed so many things to serve her mother and does not get a word of thanks.

The scene is similar to the story of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. He is angry and jealous that his father can welcome and forgive the son who was not good like him.

Jealousy is the issue in the Gospel today. It is jealousy which arises as a result of God's unlimited generosity. The laborers who had worked in the vineyard from the early morning were the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. Those who worked for the final hour were the latecomers, the non-Jews or Gentiles now being accepted into the church.

The church of Matthew's time was having a lot of trouble because the Jewish Christians found it hard to accept that the Gentiles could be promised the same rewards as they expected to get. So Matthew tells this story of God's incredible and uncontrollable generosity. The master gives the same reward to the latest comers as he gives to those who had worked all day. This makes those who had worked longest feel very jealous and angry. The point being made is that we must not be trying to limit God's generosity and determine who are deserving of it.

This is still a prevalent attitude. We think we deserve God's goodness because of our goodness and our prayer. We are jealous when others who do not seem to be as good as us or to pray as much as us have good fortune. We often rejoice in hearing of the misfortunes of others who seem to be better than us. (The Claretians - www.bibleclaret.org)

Jesus is using the stark unfairness of the story to teach his disciples one basic truth—**God's generosity is not tied to any of our human notions of fairness or equity.**

Our final image comes from a story from Pastor Delmer Chilton.

Some years ago, I had a workman at my house to do some repairs. He knew I was a minister and, in the middle of pulling a pipe out of my wall, he stopped working, stood up and said, "Preacher, can I ask you a question?" I soon realized he was an active church person looking for a second opinion on a matter that had vexed his heart for quite some time. "This here feller Hitler, what killed all them Jews and all, if he was to have asked God for forgiveness right before he died, would he still have got to go to heaven? Would God really forgive him?"

Realizing I was on touchy ground, I hedged my bets a little bit. "Well, I have serious doubts as to whether Hitler ever felt remorse for anything other than failing to win the war, and I doubt that he ever thought that his program of exterminating the Jews was either wrong or evil, so I doubt Hitler asked God for forgiveness, but, if he had sincerely and earnestly repented of his sin, then yes, God would have forgiven him, and yes, he would still "get to go to heaven."

He looked at me for a moment, then he threw his wrench on the floor, raised his hands up in exasperation and shouted, not at me but at the universe, "That's not right! That's not fair!"

I responded, "Well it may not be fair, but it is most certainly the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The gospel is not fair to any of us, thank God. And our only possible response to the fact that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2) is to receive God's love into our lives gratefully and to share it with others joyfully.