

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Matthew 20:1-16

The same denarius.

It doesn't seem fair, does it? I'm sure that crosses at least a few minds when I first read through the Holy Gospel this morning. That's not the way it works in the real world. Those who work more and longer get paid more, especially when they work the same job. That's only fair. So then why does Jesus act like the workers are the ones in the wrong for complaining in this parable? Isn't the manager the one who needs to be set straight?

I stumbled upon a study done about unemployment not too long ago. I think it was out of the UK. The researchers found that most of the unemployed they surveyed really started looking hard for a job about a month before unemployment ran out, when they really started to get nervous about paying the bills. To be fair, I know plenty of unemployed people who have looked hard for a job all the while they were on unemployment, who've prayed each night for work, who couldn't stand the thought of spending more time than they had to on unemployment. On the other hand, though, I have also heard some unemployed people speak of their time on unemployment as a vacation of sorts, even calling themselves "funemployed." Those who speak in such a way would do well to remember St. Paul's words to the Thessalonians, ***"If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat."***

All the workers in the vineyard were standing in the unemployment line the day the owner hired them. And this wasn't a modern unemployment line. They hadn't been getting any benefits on the meanwhile. They were uncertain and anxious, they felt like poor providers for their families. They were standing in the unemployment line doing the only thing you really did in such a line: waiting. And then a kind man drove up. He drove up and offered them a decent wage for an honest day's work, and they jumped at it. All the workers were hired by chance. They weren't hired because their resumes caught the owner's eye or they had the best references. The owner didn't do interviews or background checks. He kindly hired the first men he saw. Although labor is cheap when workers are aplenty, he promised them a considerable wage. Yet how quickly the workers' gratefulness turned to anger!

Companies usually don't let workers share information about their salaries for a reason. It is human nature that even when well-paid employees find out what other well-paid employees make, contentment quickly turns to envy and grumbling. They were happy with their wage until they realized someone else made more, just as we're happy with our cell phone until a friend gets one with more bells and whistles, or with our car until someone else drives by with a newer model. And sometimes that grumbling continues until a wake-up call arrives, when workers jobs get farmed out to a third-world country for pennies on every dollar they'd earned. We've seen plenty of that in the last decade. It's funny how an amount we weren't content with before seems like a lot when we're not making it anymore.

When the owner asked, ***"Do you begrudge my generosity?"*** he literally said in the Greek, ***"Is your eye evil because I am good?"*** Their eyes, in jealousy, had begrudged the owner's generosity. Their evil eyes called the master's virtue sin, and their sin virtue. They were right about one thing though: the owner's generosity wasn't fair, because charity isn't fair. The whole point of charity is helping those who can't help themselves, which is precisely what the owner had done for all the employees, even those who now grumbled. But work-righteousness has a way of distorting our view of things.

What is the denarius in our parable today? It is Christ. Every laborer, no matter when they were hired, received Christ, which is more than they could have expected that morning and more than they deserved. The focus of this parable is not on the worker's labor but on the owner's generosity. The focus is not on what we have done for God, but on what God has done for us in Christ.

The men hired in our parable were given a purpose, fed, and sent home better than they left. Yet more than enough wasn't enough when the sinful nature got involved. They sought more. They appealed, not to the owner's clearly demonstrated generosity, but to their own works. They pled the victorious life, demanding what the owner had never promised. They felt entitled to a bigger, better denarius than the rest. But Jesus did not begin the parable, "***For the kingdom of this world is like.***" He began it, "***For the kingdom of heaven is like.***" These men forgot how desperate they were before the owner had hired them. They forgot that a beggar doesn't bargain with a generous hand. They'd forgotten the hopelessness, fear, and worry that had defined their life before, just as fear, hopelessness, and worry must envelop the unbeliever when he or she honestly considers the afterlife.

In the world there must be distinctions. Some make more, some make less. Some have positions of greater honor, some positions of lesser. Some have titles before their names, some have none. Some are parents and some are children. Some are teachers and some are students. Some are employers and some are employees. Some are pastors and some are laypeople. The list could go on and on. The good news of this parable, however, is that all have equal standing before God. And what a comfort that is. Each Christian can go about his or her daily tasks with the confidence and comfort that what awaits him or her is no greater for anyone else, with gratitude that, while so many, many even with much greater distinction, do not have what they have through faith.

Every Christian, great or small, rich or poor, long in the vineyard or just now called from idleness, receives the same new birth into a living hope through the same cleansing waters of Holy Baptism. Every Christian, regardless of the length of their list of sins to confess, receives the same Absolution through Christ's death and resurrection. No Christian has a bigger or better Jesus than another, but one and the same Jesus who cannot possibly be any bigger or better than He was on the cross for our sins. Every Christian, every laborer in the Lord's vineyard, receives the same denarius, the same Jesus, in the same beggarly hand of God-given faith. Don't wait until another takes your place to appreciate what you have. The Owner can do what He wants with what is His, and He has chosen to give what is His to you. Who could begrudge generosity like that? Who could possibly complain about serving such a kind and benevolent Lord? Amen.

**Please excuse any typos or grammatical errors. This manuscript was typed from a preaching outline.