

SEPTUAGESIMA

Matthew 20:1-16

I Get to Work for Such a Master!

A man can go from extremely happy with his wage to extremely unhappy in but a moment: the moment he finds out what his coworker makes. That's why most employers insist you keep your salary to yourself. A peaceful workplace and public pay stubs don't mix.

We see the contentious nature of wages in our text today, and I would dare to say that many of us agree in principle with the grievance of those who'd labored long. It does seem unfair that they should work all day and make the same as those who'd worked but an hour. So why doesn't Jesus take their side?

In the kingdom of the left, that is, in the civic realm, there must be disparity. The kingdom of the left can succeed only on disparity, that is, on the principle that those who **work longer make more, who work harder make more, who are trained better make more**. It's called incentive, and without incentive, markets collapse. If everyone in the office made the same no matter what they did, no one would do anything, or, at the least, a few unfortunate, pushover saps would get stuck doing it all. The beauty and the ugliness of capitalism is it doesn't care what someone needs, but rewards what someone does. When someone becomes unproductive, even through no fault of their own, capitalism has little use for them. "That is a problem for charities to deal with," capitalism says. St. Paul himself admonished the Thessalonians, "*If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat*" (3:10).

But Jesus is not here speaking about the kingdom of the left. He is speaking of the kingdom of the right, the kingdom of grace. It is **not cold and callous** like the kingdom of the left. It is **not built on merit, but on mercy, not on incentive, but invitation**, and that is why the gospel sometimes seems so backwards, even unfair or offensive, to our way of thinking. Charity is part and parcel of its existence, as the unproductive are chosen to bear fruit. St. Paul tells the Ephesians, "*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*" (4:4-6). **King and peasant, president and prisoner, boss and underling, mother and child**, all receive the same Baptism, the same Faith, the same gospel from the same gracious God. In the kingdom of God, all are equal in their need.

You'd think we'd all rejoice in this fact, and I pray we do, but how easy it is for the old Adam to turn God's pity upon us into an injustice! How easy it is for us to begrudge another what we have been freely given as a gift well beyond our own personal price range! Jesus has not taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as You wish we would forgive those who trespass against us," but, "*Forgives us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Hands full of grudges have no room for grace.

The stories of the Desert Fathers include this account:

A brother in Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to him, saying, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you". So he got up and went. He took a sack, filled it with sand and

cut a small hole at the bottom and carried it on his shoulders. The others came out to meet him and said, "What is this, father" The Abba said to them, "My sins run out behind me, and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another" When they heard that, they said no more to the brother but forgave him.

Remember the parable of the unmerciful servant. Having been forgiven a very large debt by his master, he went and choked another servant who owed him a much smaller debt, demanding payment. When the master heard, he sent that ungrateful servant to jail until he paid every penny of what he'd been previously forgiven. There is no forgiveness for the forgiven who will not forgive, for men are not glad to receive what they consider beneath them to give.

The old man of the flesh not only misunderstands forgiveness, but also service to God. The old man serves because of God's **threats in the law**, or in the hope of **earning something**, but most definitely **not in love**. He serves like the man who tells his wife, "I'm only doing this so you don't throw a fit or you'll do something for me"—hardly the stuff of swooning. The old man sighs disappointedly, like a grounded child, when he misses out on the "fun" of sin. He prays in his hospital bed, "Lord, I'll do this, that, and the other, if you only make me better." He complains at God's mercy to another: "I make the same wage, but I've served longer. What a rip off! Why should I serve such a master?"

The new man of faith, however, glances into his hand, sees his undeserved wage, much greater than anything he's given the Master, and marvels, "I make the same wage, and I've been able to serve such a Master longer than my brother. What a deal!" He serves in love, like the man who buys a surprise gift for his wife and beams with anticipation as he waits for her to come home and see it. He still struggles with temptation, but does not sigh, no rather rejoices, when by the strength of Christ in him he escapes sin. He does not promise tit for tat in hospital beds, but prays with Christ in Gethsemane, "*Thy will be done.*"

Notice that those called later never ask about the wage, and the Master doesn't promise one, as He did with those hired first. They trust that He who was kind enough to hire them will be kind enough to provide. Jesus once told His disciples, "*So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'*" We do well to say the same, because we cannot do more than our Lord asks in this life as the old Adam drags at our heels. Yet our God still richly dotes on us with daily bread and, more importantly, Bread from Heaven for the forgiveness of our sins. And that is not **incentive**: a carrot before a horse. That is **motivation**: a life saved, love selflessly shared.

Our Lord sets our wages before us today, and wonderful they are. Soon we'll taste His generosity in His Supper. When you do, look to your left, look to your right, and be glad that your neighbor receives the same Gift, the same Jesus from the Father's generous hand. Be thankful that "*the last will be first, and the first last.*" While nothing is more frightening than idleness and uncertainty, nothing is more comforting than a place and purpose in the Lord's vineyard. Delight that the Master may do with what is His as He wishes, because He wishes to share it with us, even His Son. So let us never begrudge another mercy; rather, let us freely share with them the fruit of faith, the fruit of the cross, where Christ took the wages of sin to give us the gift of God, for that is what the forgiven do. Amen.