

## **"When Others Get What We Deserve"**

Matthew 20:1-7; Matthew 20:8-15

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 2, 2017 – 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

One church that I served developed a special partnership with another nearby congregation. We shared in mission outreach and held regular classes and discussions together throughout the year. We also shared three worship services each year—Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and one morning service each June. Now I especially looked forward to summer worship over at the Disciples of Christ because they had air conditioning and we didn't.

It was always delightful to be over there and enjoy the comfortable temperature, if only briefly. Of course the next Sunday we'd go back home and swelter all over again, but we were more or less reconciled to it. I think we dealt with our situation pretty well and accepted that being hot was our lot in life. We even managed to keep a smile on our sweaty faces and never, well almost never, begrudged others who had climate control.

Oh, sometimes when the temperature inside our sanctuary would reach the 80's, we might momentarily have a little sympathy for ourselves. We'd have a tinge of envy for others with newer buildings or with more resources to modernize. We counted our blessings for what we did have; still, it was hard to forget our discomfort.

So, once in a while it would only be natural that our thoughts should wander to the folks relaxing in sanctuaries elsewhere, bathed by gentle currents of delightfully chilled air. These Christians enjoyed low humidity which made every breath they took seem like the fresh winds of early Spring. Men kept their suit coats on in these other churches and women pulled light sweaters over their shoulders. Worshippers could declare the beauty of the day as they glanced out through slightly frosted windows.

No, we didn't begrudge them for their situation. Instead we delighted that others had every creature comfort as they, too, worshipped the Lord. Perhaps, we reasoned, they're a little bit more faithful and should be so rewarded. Maybe they worked harder at their churchly duties and ought to sit sweetly while we sweat profusely. Perhaps they sacrificed greatly to have their air conditioning; then again, maybe a rich member just left them a bequest.

Don't misunderstand me. We were glad that others could be comfortable while we sweltered. Maybe there was a reason for our sacrifice but, then again, how come others were so lucky and the loyal, faithful folk that made up our church weren't? Lesser people might have said it was a bit unfair, but that didn't keep us from thinking it sometimes.

Well, I exaggerate a bit in this remembrance from years back, but the truth is that we don't like it when others get something we think is undeserved. We don't like it when certain people have things we don't have. Inequity gets under our skin quickly. Human nature resents advantages that others have. And it's the same reaction that we find in our parable for today.

The owner of a vineyard has work that needs to be done and so he goes out early in the morning and hires some men from the town labor pool. A little while later it is apparent that

not everything is going to get done, so he goes back and engages more workers. In fact, he repeats this several times and hires his last men as late as five o'clock.

As the sun goes down, it's time to settle with the workers and he tells his foreman to pay them off, starting with the last to be engaged. These late hires each receive what is the standard payment for a full day's work. Well, you can imagine how surprised the others are, and happy. They figure if these latecomers get that much, then surely they'll get paid even more.

So you can understand their disappointment when they find that everyone receives the same amount. They figure that the later workers should get less, or those who worked a full day should get a bonus. It's all very logical. These early-starting workers grumble at the landowner, but he responds, "Didn't I give you exactly what I promised you?" They are mad at him, but he says, "Can't I be generous with what I have if I choose to? Or do you begrudge these other workers so much that you will complain at what it is mine to do?"

Of course this parable of Jesus' is not really intended to teach agricultural economics; rather, its purpose is to reveal something about the nature of God, and about our relationship to God, and our relationship with others. This parable is addressed specifically to the Pharisees, those strict religious men and others, who regularly criticized the company that Jesus kept.

In this story the landowner takes pity on those whom he has hired last. Perhaps the reason they weren't chosen earlier is that they appeared weakest, or sickest, or too old or too young. They will have practically nothing to take home with them. The pay for a few hours of work will not be enough to keep a family, and the children will be the ones to suffer and go hungry. So the farmer is moved to generosity, and his payment of the full wage to everyone is evidence of this.

That, says Jesus, is exactly how God deals with us. That is what God is like—merciful. Even to tax collectors and thieves and other blatant sinners, God grants an unmerited place in the Kingdom. So great is God's goodness that when a sinner repents, he or she is welcomed fully. The good, of course, will have their place in the Kingdom; but so will others. The important thing is that a person turns to God, whenever in their life that may come to pass.

The first workers in our story say it is not fair that they start early and put in more effort, yet still receive no more than those who arrive late. The Pharisees likewise take exception to all the rabble that Jesus both attracts and accepts. He preaches that these former non-keepers of the Law will have spiritual equity with those who have kept the regulations and commandments for years. They complain, "What's fair about those who have lived lives of debauchery ending up with the same as those who have always abided by the rules?"

When people join our church they are given privilege to all the congregation's resources, both material and spiritual. I guess some could take exception to this generosity, arguing that a member of 20 years should have more benefits than a newcomer; that a person who entered last year should have some advantage over one who joined last week. After all, it's deserved, isn't it?. Think of how much more money the long-term members have given. Consider how much more volunteer time they have contributed. Loyalty for the long haul ought to be worth something. Their say-so ought to count for more.

The problem is that this is the world's logic. It's what the early workers tried to argue in this parable. It's also what the Pharisees asserted.

Just as the landowner realized the poverty of those who worked in the fields, Jesus says that God also realizes the great spiritual poverty of humanity... and is merciful. What God has created God loves.

The world's logic says that we should earn our position in life; in things of the spirit, Jesus says, it's a matter of God's grace. Being near to God's heart is a privilege that even the most devout cannot earn by sheer effort alone.

You can almost hear Jesus say: "Can't God be generous if God chooses to? Instead of complaining when those whom you reject are drawn to my ministry, you ought to rejoice because they are now finding what you have had all along. God's welcome is being made known to them and they are responding with joy. Leave the matter of fairness to the courts and understand that, here, we are dealing with God's love."

So today this parable challenges us to put aside worldly standards, where obviously they do not apply, and to rid ourselves of the thought that acceptance before God is based on our merit. We should live to our best, but we cannot earn our way into heaven. By grace is the only way we enter God's Kingdom. In divine justice people don't get what they deserve; they get more than they merit.

I, like you, stand before God in judgment, but cannot determine the worth or value of another. I can be critical of my own behavior, but I need to avoid the arrogance to criticize others as if I am God myself. If the Lord can find some questionable person worthy, who am I to put them down? Envy and criticism should have no place in a Christian's life and surely no place in the Church.

God is loving and kind, and it is for that reason that Christ acted likewise. Those who thought themselves righteous repeatedly criticized Jesus for consorting with the despised and the outcast. Through this parable the mirror is turned against his accusers that they might also recognize themselves among the unworthy. For in censuring Jesus for his mercy, they were really censuring God as well.

What a priceless gift it is to find acceptance despite all our imperfections, to know first-hand how it feels to be loved unconditionally. It can't be bought with a millionaire's money. Fame or family connections have absolutely no influence in gaining it. In fact, the gift is free but only when you willingly bring your love forward and allow yourself be transformed to live as a new person in Christ.

So here's a lesson you might take home from today: When people stop looking down on others, they'll find it's much easier to look up to God.