

Justice in the Vineyard

This parable, unique to Matthew, is one of the most difficult both to interpret and to act upon. In the Gospel it comes on the heels of Peter's question to Jesus about what disciples will get in return for everything they have given up to follow him (19:27). Jesus assures Peter of a hundredfold return and of eternal inheritance, but then he speaks about the last being first and the first being last (19:30), hinting that in the reign of God there is a different economy at work. The parable takes us into a scenario of reckoning that seems unjust by human standards.

Multiple Hires

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard is a two-part parable. In the first, a landowner goes out five different times during a day to hire laborers for his vineyard. The story does not tell why he makes so many trips. Perhaps it is harvest time, and it is urgent that the crop be picked right away. Maybe the work is not going as fast as he had originally hoped, and he needs to keep getting more workers. With the first group hired early in the morning he makes the agreement to pay them a denarius, the usual daily wage (v. 2). Those hired next, at 9:00 A.M., he promises to pay "whatever is right" (v. 4). He does the same with those hired at noon and 3:00 P.M. When he finds still more workers standing in the marketplace at 5:00 P.M., he tells them to go to his vineyard, but does not mention payment (v. 7).

Payday

Scene 2 brings us to the end of the day, when the owner tells his manager to call in all the workers and

Lectionary Loop

Proper 16, Year A, Matthew
16:13-20

to give them their due, beginning with the last hired (v. 8). When the first hired saw that the last hired workers received a denarius for only a small amount of work, their expectations rise, and they think they will be given more. Upon receiving only a denarius, they begin to grumble against the landowner and to complain that he has made the last hired “equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (v. 12). Any hearers of this parable who have a sense of fairness will find themselves agreeing with the grumblers.

The vineyard owner replies with three questions and finishes with the same statement as in 19:30: “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (20:16). This saying is not the point of the parable. It is a free-floating proverb that appears in a number of different contexts in the Gospels (in addition to Matt 19:30 and 20:16, see Mark 10:31 and Luke 13:30). The reason why the last hired are paid first is for narrative effect. The first hired need to see what the eleventh-hour workers receive, or there is no story!

No Injustice

The first part of the owner’s reply is a statement with a question: “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?” (v. 13). The address, “friend,” is ironic; in the ancient world friendship is only between persons of the same social status. There is no question of hired workers and a landowner becoming friends. The employer insists there is no injustice being done and reminds the grumbler that they had agreed on one denarius, which is what he got. He advises him to take what is his due and depart. He asserts that he has the power to choose to give the last hired the same amount and queries, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (v. 15a). The answer to the question is obvious. In the power dynamics between landowners and hired workers, it is patently clear that the owner has perfect freedom to dispose of his property and money as he chooses. The next question brings home the whole point, but nonliteral translations can skew the meaning. The NRSV renders verse 15b “Or are you envious

because I am generous?” Literally, it says, “Or is your eye evil because I am good?” A bit of further explanation is needed to get the point.

Evil-Eye Envy

Matthew is setting up a contrast between evil and good, which is one of his favorite techniques (Matt 5:45; 7:11, 17-18; 12:34-35; 22:10). The “goodness” of the owner is not a question of generosity. Payment of only a denarius is a subsistence wage; it was barely enough to feed a family for a day. This “goodness” has to do with the owner’s manner of establishing justice. The owner is accusing the grumbler of having evil-eye envy. In many cultures, both ancient and modern, there is the belief that certain persons can cause injury through a look. In the Middle East today you can find many people who sport a small, blue glass eye, attached to a cap or a lapel, an amulet to ward off evil eyes. In the Bible, several times it is mentioned that an evil eye is manifested in envy and covetousness (Deut 15:9; Wis 4:12; Sir 14:8). These are the most pernicious vices, as they destroy the equilibrium of a community. Repeatedly in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus warns against having an evil eye. He insists that if your eye is evil, the whole body will be in darkness (6:22-23), and he uses a graphic hyperbole, advising that you should tear out an evil eye and throw it away (5:29; 18:9).

Equal to Us

The real rub is in the complaint “You have made them equal to us” (v. 12). And that is precisely how justice is in the realm of God: All are equal—equally created in God’s image, equally redeemed by Christ, and equally endowed with the Spirit. Moreover, no one does anything to earn God’s goodness. Some years ago an unemployed single mother helped me understand. From my privileged position I clearly identified with the first hired and struggled with what to me seemed injustice on the part of the owner. She, on the other hand, identified with the ones who waited in the marketplace all day. With no skills, she, too, waited endless days in line at the unemployment office to no

Reflections

1. With which character(s) in the parable do you identify? How does your social location affect how you understand the meaning of the parable?
2. Share an experience you have had of undeserved or unearned grace.
3. If we think of the payment time at the end of the day in the parable as the time of reckoning with God, what might it say about there being no half-reward—all are offered full salvation?
4. How does our consumeristic culture feed evil-eye envy and entitlement? What can we do to circumvent this?

avail. She observed that the ones who stand in the market all day are not lazy; they are the aged, the ones with disabilities. They are the ones who look less able to give the owner as much work for his money, so they are always passed over. When the owner pays them, she observed, it is no use if he gives them less than a denarius. With any less there is no way to feed their families. Certainly, she acknowledged, the first hired worked longer and harder, but they had the satisfaction all day of knowing that at the end of the day they could feed their children. That, she told me, is justice in God's realm: Everyone deserves to eat at the end of the day, and it doesn't depend on how much or how little they have worked.

Teaching Tips

1. In Matthew's community this parable may have enabled discussion about attitudes of Jewish Christians who felt they had a longer claim on God's promises than the Gentile newcomers. Explore with the group any ways in which their faith community may struggle with attitudes of entitlement by longer established members toward immigrant ethnic groups or neophytes in the faith.
2. Learn more about the notion of a "living wage." Discuss how our society measures worth by working ability and earnings. How does this affect our ability to regard one another as equal?

Sources

See www.livingwagecampaign.org; www.letjusticeroll.org; Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000); William R. Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1994); Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers, Year A* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 143-53.

Study Bible

See *NISB*, 1752, for notes on Matt 3:13-15 on righteousness/justice; and *NISB*, 1782, for notes on Matt 20:1-16.