

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Patricia Daniel-Turk on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### **What is just and fair?**

If taken literally, the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard, the gospel reading for today (Matthew 20:1-16), would likely raise the hackles of any business person, whether in the profit or not-for-profit world. This parable certainly is not about a fair wage or just recompense for work done. In fact, it goes against our sensibilities of what is just and fair and this is a danger for any of us hearing the parables and trying to make sense of them as 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians.

Many of us struggle to understand the parables of Jesus; because somehow they just do not seem to make sense, especially to those who are more literal in their thinking....this is not a judgment but a statement of reality. The temptation is to be too literal about who the people in the story are and what they represent. Jesus seeks to help his listeners to understand the kingdom by using analogies and symbols they can relate to....."The kingdom is like....The kingdom can be compared to.

The parable heard today is not unlike the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that parable, the elder son in the story is incensed that the younger brother who squandered his inheritance is welcomed home with unabashed lavishness by his father. IT IS NOT FAIR! It is not fair that the elder son, who stayed home and did what he was supposed to do, does not get his just reward. No, it is not fair...and that's what we think every time we hear that parable.

Is it not the same with today's parable? How unjust of the landowner not to give those who labored all day in the hot sun their just reward. How unfair of the landowner to treat each of the laborers equally, despite the disproportionate hours they worked.

How easily we can relate to the grumbling of the laborers who assumed that because they went into the vineyard early in the day, they would be paid more. Such dangerous assumptions can be in our relationships, within our work settings, within this congregation, within our national thinking. There is a saying...."Assumptions are planned resentments." Whenever we assume anything, we set ourselves up for possible disappointment or even worse, as we set the other person, place, or thing up as the object of our disappointment, anger or resentment.

What we learn from this parable is that the landowner begins by giving everyone in the story work. Each of the laborers are unemployed and each is given work to do with the promise of pay. They all begin in the same situation but easily forget by the end of the day where they started. Their energy goes not to the fact that they have had work, and being paid but to the inequity they see. Envy becomes more important than what they have received as stated in verse 15...."Are you envious because I am generous?"

How often have you and I found ourselves envious of another's gifts, talents, abilities, possessions, social status, and the list goes on? How often are you and I envious of other's good for-

tune? Envy can cause us to diminish our own gifts and talents and secretly to rob others of theirs. God is the giver of every good gift, whether it is ours or someone else's.

This parable is essentially about the generosity of God. It is not about equity or proper disbursement of wages but about a gracious and undeserved gift. It is not about an economic exchange but, rather about a bestowing of grace and mercy to all, no matter what time they have put in or how deserving or undeserving we may think them to be. God's generosity often violates our own sense of right and wrong, our sense of how things would be if we ran the world. Are you and I unable to celebrate another's good fortune because we have not first celebrated our own? How often are you and I ungrateful for God's graciousness and mercy? How often do you and I deny God's love and forgiveness in our own lives?

Jesus leaves us with a question.....Can we learn to see through the eyes of God? Our ideas of right and wrong, what is just and unjust, are not necessarily God's ideas.....and that is a very good thing! We are reminded by this parable that the tables are turned. When we look for equity, we are surprised to find generosity.

You and I are invited and challenged to look at where we see ourselves in Jesus' parable. This parable reminds us that God is a lousy bookkeeper and invites us to transform our pride, our envy, and hardness into joy by admiring and celebrating God's astounding generosity.

The parable calls us to look at ourselves honestly and lovingly, as God looks at us. It invites us to turn from holding grudges because things did not go our way, to let go of the stuff of our lives that keeps us from being joy-filled and grateful people. Gratefulness is at the heart of our faith.

Amen.