

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Sept. 21, 2014  
Matthew 20:1-16 “*God is a lousy bookkeeper*”

In yesterday’s *Dennis the Menace* cartoon, five year old Dennis returns from a friend’s birthday party still holding the wrapped gift. He tells his Mom, ‘*the birthday cake was terrible, so I brought the gift home.*’

We live in a ‘quid pro quo’ culture. [‘quid pro quo’ = this for that] We measure, we reciprocate, we tally accounts. I try to give all our grandchildren something of approximately equal value when their birthdays come around. We are embarrassed if we receive as a gift something of obviously greater value than what we have given. We have a vocabulary for gifts or kindnesses we cannot repay. *Pay it forward*, we say.

In a ‘quid pro quo’ culture, it is difficult for those who receive ‘*charity*’ to maintain their dignity. Charity by definition is something given without expectation of repayment. Charity is something the recipient has no hope of repaying. [There is a book we will be using in Faith Formation later this year called *Toxic Charity*, and I hope you will all join in that study. We will talk more about charity and dignity then.]

When I began practicing law about forty years ago, a social justice issue pushing to the forefront was equal pay for women. Restated, it became ‘equal pay for equal work.’ Among those in control of the economic purse strings, this restatement was a ‘cop out,’ as it was readily understood that women were not as strong, could not reason as well, lift, fetch, carry, needed more time off to care for children and therefore were not as reliable...fill in the blanks. In other words, the argument went, women *could* not do *equal work*, so the male dominated work force need not feel threatened by the concept of ‘equal pay.’ The paycheck was tied to a (male) standard of merit, with higher dollars rewarding ‘superior’ performance and thereby conferring status.

Forty years later, women receive on average only 78 cents to every dollar paid to their male counterparts. ‘Quid pro quo’ thinking has serious social and economic consequences, including poverty for families in which the woman is the primary wage earner.

Jesus tells us, that’s not how it is in God’s Kingdom. God is a lousy bookkeeper.

Today’s Gospel story is called ‘the laborers in the vineyard.’ The passage is not so much about the laborers as about the landowner– the landowner who pays everyone the same amount turns on its head our system of the economic value of labor. The standard to which we aspire – rewarding those who work the hardest or produce the most or take the highest risks – is not the Gospel standard.

‘The Kingdom is like a landowner who gives *everyone* work to do.’ We can stop right there. If it were not for the landowner, *all* would be unemployed.

A single denarius was the usual daily wage – it was enough for daily bread for one person. In Jesus’ story, the first to sign on to work for the landowner agreed to the *usual daily* wage, a denarius. The latecomers were told they would receive a *fair* wage.

The laborers expected equity, equitable compensation for their work. They encounter generosity, not ‘quid pro quo.’ Just as all the Israelites collect manna for the day in the Exodus story, so the laborers in the Kingdom vineyard– regardless of how long they work – receive their daily bread.

In the Kingdom, God’s generosity is not only visible to all, it is highlighted.

The landowner insists that those who worked the entire day be paid *last*. These hard-working first-comers could have been paid first and sent on their way, and they might never know that the latecomers received the same. But that’s not the landowner’s plan. The landowner wants all to know that a ‘fair wage’ is enough to eat for everyone.

Of course, the first-come laborers object strenuously - ‘you have made them equal to us’ they complain. That’s a status argument, yes? (Think of the disciples asking to sit at Jesus’ right and left hand, because they have left everything to follow him) Injecting their notions of equality, accountability, measurability, they demean the landowner’s generosity.

The laborers forget that at the start of the day, *they* were the unemployed and they were grateful for the opportunity to work for a day’s wage. They turn ‘give us today our daily bread,’ into ‘give *me my* daily bread’.

The landowner responds, ‘*am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?*’ In literal translation the Greek is something like, “is your eye evil because I am good?” Another way to express the Greek idiom might be, *Are you jealous of the good fortune of your neighbor?* Envy and jealousy do not belong in the Kingdom. Happily, the landowner is patient with their complaints and pays them anyway.

As Jesus preaches in Matthew 5, God provides rain for the just and unjust alike. (Matt. 5:45).

Kingdom stories, or parables, serve to re-frame our vision, helping us recognize something we already know. Jesus comments on the unjust economic system, then as well as now.

The day laborers have no steady jobs. They live on the margins, and go out daily with the hope of earning enough to feed themselves for the day. The denarius was not a living wage for a family.

Day laborers suffer from what today we call “food insecurity.” Some 15% of our population in

the US, or 23.4% of our children, suffer from food insecurity, meaning they do not know whether they will have food or adequate nutrition tomorrow or the next day.

There has been recent media focus on the fast food workers, most of whom – including supervisors – earn the minimum wage or just a little above. Many minimum wage earners live below the poverty line. Why? For one thing, because they are hourly workers, their employers can and often do manipulate their hours worked to avoid paying benefits. A minimum wage job at forty hours a week may be enough to pay rent and buy food, but when the hours are reduced to irregular shifts averaging out at twenty or so hours a week, it's hardly a living wage. Irregular shifts mean the worker can not hold a second job with potentially conflicting shift times. McDonald's workers in NYC are trying to unionize around these issues.

A few weeks ago, I spoke with someone employed in a local business here in Anacortes, who said when clients were few, she was sent home. She had been sent home so often, she could no longer afford her job. She had a child to feed. Her forty hour minimum wage job had been whittled down to an irregular fifteen to twenty, no benefits.

How do we assist those workers on the lowest end of the economic system?

This ties into some 'wonderings' I have about today's Scriptures.

I wonder why the landowner does not take the additional step of distributing *more* of his wealth. I wonder why the landowner does not give them enough to feed a family. I wonder why the landowner does not promise them work the next day. I think of the parable of the rich fool, who says '*What should I do, I have no place to store my crops?*' Luke 12:17. The rich fool's conclusion is to build more barns, not distribute his food to the poor. I wonder whether there is a connection to the concept of toxic charity, and whether our ideas of quid pro quo prevent us from appreciating the generosity of a daily wage, day by day.

There is a tension in today's Gospel as well as paradox. God's generosity, gracious and undeserved giving. Our human desire to hold God accountable. Our expectation that God will measure our good work and reward it.

There is tension in the Exodus lesson. The Israelites complain of their hunger. They, too, are suffering from 'food insecurity'. They forget their misery under slavery in Egypt. They remember fondly that they had enough to eat then, and they curse Moses for leading them into the wilderness. God hears their cry and provides manna (bread) for the day, and quail (meat) in the evening. There is enough for a day off – a true Sabbath. But, the manna deteriorates, and cannot be stored up. There is no assurance *except trust in God's generosity* that there will be food the next day.

I wonder, if the simple message is that God provides to those who trust in God, why so many of our Christian brothers and sisters around the world do not have enough to provide food for their families?

Still, Jesus' teachings are pretty clear that his followers' job is to provide food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty. We are to trust in God's abundance, but the distribution is up to us.

I would like to inject a comment about Total Common Ministry here at Christ Church. In this congregation, this vineyard, we each have places to serve according to our different gifts. Those of us presently serving in the Support Circle, (Dale, Betty Anne, Eric as Deacon and Carol and I serving as your priests), are not paid for our ministry. TCM is a ministry of the whole congregation. Like the laborers in the vineyard, we all receive the same.

Why do the laborers continue to work in the Kingdom vineyard? Why would they come back the next day, early in the morning, if they will receive the same by showing up late? How will the harvest get done at all under such a system? If all the laborers can ever expect to receive – no matter when they come to work – is their daily bread and no more, shouldn't they be looking elsewhere for a better paying job?

We labor for love. We argue for the right and justice, and we struggle for the good, not for the sake of ourselves, or our status or identity, or even for the sake of the church. We are moved by love and concern for every other.

I have left you with a lot of questions. Here are a few concluding statements:

God is a lousy bookkeeper, and will not be placed under any obligation to pay or reimburse.

God provides abundantly, but the fair distribution is our problem. We are responsible for the harvest, the gathering in, and charged with assisting those who do not have enough.

We all start with nothing, and we do not receive according to the merits of our labor.

God's generosity is an absolute gift which we cannot measure or repay.

Whenever we are tempted to look for equity, we would do well to remember God's undeserved generosity.

God's grace extends beyond the confines of the Kingdom story, or the lesson in Exodus.

Thank God.

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman  
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