

Maximum Wage
Sermon on Matthew 20:1-16 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, September 18, 2005

As you may or may not know, I am a huge fan of the pipe organ. I'm such a big fan that I really don't know what I will do if ever I am appointed to a church without one. So you can imagine how thrilled I was when Chris Brunt invited me to attend a dinner meeting of the Dallas chapter of the American Guild of Organists last week. Chris explained that the purpose of the dinner was to allow organists and the ministers of the churches they serve a chance to get to know one another. This is a really good idea, not the least because the relationship between ministers and organists has often been as warm and friendly as that between UT and A&M.

And then it started to happen. I began to wonder if in fact the real reason Chris had invited me to this dinner was because I was going to be named "Preacher of the Year" by the organists' guild. The award would be for my recognition and appreciation of organists' tireless work and constant devotion to the life of the church. I would be serenaded with an appropriate fanfare, given a handsome plaque, and asked to share some brief remarks. Of course I was flattered when Chris introduced me to his peers and their clergy guests as "young, hip, progressive, and dynamic," but you can imagine my disappointment when we went quickly from announcements to upcoming events and straight into the installation of new officers without so much as a single fugue or even a small trophy. How devastating. I didn't even win the "Reverend Congeniality" award.

Nevermind the fact that the American Guild of Organists does not sponsor any such contest or that my work on behalf of church organists does not go much farther than occasionally saying, "That was a terrific opening voluntary." I wanted to be "Preacher of the Year" because in some profoundly sinful sense my ego has not developed beyond the age of two: it is concerned

primarily with three things: I, me, and mine. Which is not to say that I have not developed a sense of justice. On the contrary, my sense of fairness was fine-tuned as a child. If my younger sisters and I wanted to split a soft drink, we lined up shoulder to shoulder peering intently at our glasses like U.N. weapons inspectors as our mother poured out equal amounts of that sugary beverage. Heaven help the person who got even one milliliter more than the others. The same was true for chocolate cake, Christmas presents, or—God forbid—cold, hard cash money.

It wasn't enough that I got my equal portion or what was fairly mine. I wanted to be darned sure that no one got more than they deserved. And therein lies the problem. The rabbis¹ tell a story about two merchants who were bitter enemies. The men competed against each other in everything: business, wealth, prestige. One night an angel appeared to one of the men and announced that he would be granted a wish. The only condition was that whatever he wanted—riches, long life, or healthy children—his enemy would receive double. The man thought for a very long time before replying, “I wish to be made blind in one eye.”

Why is it that we have the term *Schadenfreude*, meaning the joy or pleasure we take from someone else's misfortune, suffering, or pain? Why is it that keeping up with the Joneses is avidly pursued as a recreational activity? Why is it that a college-educated person earning \$75,000 a year is richer than 95% of the world, and yet bemoans how little he has? Why indeed unless these reflect something dark, but nonetheless true, about our sinful human selves.

That darkness in our souls is the emptiness that is ingratitude. Thomas Gibbons called the ungrateful person “Creation's blot, creation's blank.”² Ingratitude is an emptiness, a void; it feels no obligation, it owes no thanks, it is unmindful of benefits received. And so ingratitude is

¹ One version of the tale is told by Rabbi Steven Z. Leder in “Dead Right” at <http://www.jewishjournal.com/home/preview.php?id=13714>. Another version of the tale is told by Aesop.

² From “Where Jesus Dwelt”: That man may last, but never lives / Who much receives, but nothing gives; / Whom none can love, whom none can thank— / Creation's blot, creation's blank.

tied with a mean sense of justice, interested in a rigorous application of law and procedure and contract to ensure that we get what we deserve. Robert H. Smith says that in this worldview

[B]ehavior [is] totally determined by a web of contractual relationships where everything is precisely weighed, recorded, calculated, and balanced. Such behavior may certainly be defended as a high and splendid achievement of a people determined to build a dike against injustice and arbitrariness in human affairs.³

Indeed, law and procedure and contract are necessary to insure justice in human society and stability in economic affairs.

But God's justice and economy work in a radically different way, and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard demonstrates how. Robert Smith says, "[T]he parable contrasts such civilized calculations with shocking and undeserved generosity, with an unbounded and energetic goodness that simply reaches out in blessing."⁴ The story is simple enough: Jesus says that "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard" (Mt. 20:1). He finds a group of men and negotiates a labor contract in which they agree to one day's work in return for the usual daily wage. The landowner goes into town again at 9:00, at noon, and at 3:00, and each time he finds men who are not working. "You also go into the vineyard," the landowner says, "and I will pay you whatever is right" (20:4). At 5:00 the landowner goes to the marketplace one more time, and finds still others standing around. He asked them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" and they answered, "Because no one has hired us." The owner promptly offered them work, and sent them to his vineyard.

An hour later, the landowner instructed his foreman to assemble the workers and to give them their pay, beginning with the last group of recruits and making his way to those recruited first. When the 5:00 p.m. crew came for their pay envelopes, they discovered that they had been

³ Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg New Testament Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989) 238.

⁴ *Ibid.*

given a full day's wage. When the 6:00 a.m. crew came for their pay envelopes, they were fully expecting to receive a bonus. But they, too, received the day's wage. Not surprisingly, they were furious! They formed a union on the spot, elected a union president, and filed a formal complaint against management, alleging violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act. These last had worked but one meager hour, yet they had been "made equal" (20:12) to the men who had worked all day in the scorching heat. It was a "bare-faced injustice."⁵ Time to call a strike.

And if you are like me, you would join the picket line. My sign would read, "No equal pay for unequal work!" Like the morning shift, I'd be mad as hell that the 5:00 crew got the same pay packet. I, too, would file a complaint. But R. H. Stein is right when he points out that our own sense of anger or injustice "reveals how loveless and unmerciful we basically are." That attitude of ingratitude "is a measure of our failure to share God's values."⁶ We demonstrate that we have failed truly to understand God's love and grace when we complain, "It's not fair! They got more than they deserve."

Grace is not about what we—or anyone else—deserve, and thanks be to God for that. Because of grace, we get what we do not, indeed cannot, deserve. If grace were a matter of fairness, of getting what we merit, we might get exactly what we deserve, for as Jesus says, "With the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mt. 7:2). Indeed, God's righteousness demands judgment, and we will be accountable for our sins. But God does not wish to condemn us, nor does God will our punishment. Instead, God seeks to "accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). God "gives to all generously and ungrudgingly" (Jas. 1:5).

⁵ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed., trans. S. H. Hooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963) 37.

⁶ R. H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) 128 quoted by R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985) 290.

Our calling, then, is to rejoice in the grace that has been freely shared with us: We know God's grace by the fact that like the landowner in search of workers, God repeatedly and persistently seeks us out. Like the landowner, God accepts all who willingly respond to his offer. We know God's grace in that God continually offers to include us in the work of the vineyard, the work of the kingdom, and to reward us accordingly. Without that offer, we would have stood idly in the marketplace without direction or meaning or purpose in our lives. Without grace we have nothing to live on, but are abandoned to eke out livings as best we can. We know God's grace by virtue of our reward at the end of the day's work. Whether we have labored from sunup or from noon or from night, God is generous to us, giving us exactly what we need and being generous to all. It is true that God is free to do as he chooses with what belongs to him. And God chooses to offer us love, mercy, forgiveness, peace, joy, righteousness, and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. By grace God gives us the maximum wage. Thanks be to God. Amen.