

Pen Proper 20 Matt YR A Matt 20:1-16 September 18, 2011

Today's readings are great stewardship readings! And we do need to be thinking about stewardship, not just at this particular time of year when pledge cards will soon be distributed, but all year long. Generosity needs to be a way of life, part of our own personal theology.

These past months have been another roller coaster ride as far as the financial markets are concerned, and if you are in any way dependant on the market, which we all are, then it has been pretty scary! Whether you depend on interest income or real estate income, or your work-a-day jobs to live on, or whether you just plain have to make your payroll dollars stretch even further at the grocery store and the gas station, it has been a real trial. I mean, we put a lot of effort in to earning money, and it gets harder and harder to get something out in return.

We can really identify with those workers in Matt's Gospel who showed up early in the morning, willing to work hard to earn a decent wage to support themselves and their families. It is easy to understand why they were upset when the people who showed up right before closing received as much as they did for their efforts. The scene in Matthew is becoming more and more familiar. The issue then and now is one of daily bread.

And yet-and yet, the issue is also generosity-generosity through Grace. We know this. Not just in name, but in action. I see it lived out frequently. Whether or not we really, practically have the time, stamina or money, we spend our energy-our time, our talents, and our treasures out of love for our beloved when they are in trouble. We do this not out of duty, but out of love to give back to our friends and family, and especially to God, in gratitude for the abundant grace of God pours out.

Of course there are stellar examples of people who live out their lives based on the theology that everything really does belong to God. There are people who have little or no consideration for concepts such as “deserving,” and “earned.” I see it socially and also professionally. Some people just seem to work until the job is done; while others have that “what’s in it for me” attitude. If we want to continue to honor God, then we can use the lives of generous people as examples of God’s abundance and generosity, and as a directive to us so that we can do likewise.

Every time we say the Lord’s Prayer we pray for God to give us “enough.” And God does always give us enough. Some of us get more than enough. If we don’t give the extra away, then just like the manna given to the Israelites in the wilderness, what we get will rot. It will rot and it will spoil, and it will stink. Not maybe in our precious bank accounts, but in our hearts, and it will eat away at our spiritual health.

Jesus is telling us to return to the wilderness sojourn – a return to manna season – a return to utter and radical dependence on God and God’s daily provisions. God makes it clear that we cannot gather up **all** our wealth and save it for a rainy day. It’s not guaranteed. It goes sour on you. It spoils. It starts crawling with worms and moths. Jonah, that self serving servant of God, was a bit like Peter. He wanted to serve God, but he wanted to do it by his own methods.

God tells him to go to Nineveh, but he decides to go elsewhere, to Tarshish, since he doesn’t approve of “those people” Even after Jonah received a soaking wet lesson about how important it is to obey God’s orders, he still got angry when the sun shade bush withered and took away his comfort. The bush was an extra, a “boon, a *lagniappe*”, a 13th doughnut in a Baker’s dozen!

We current day children of God, like Jonah, get angry when our creature comforts are taken away. We become pettish, and irritable, when we have things taken away from us that were *never ours in to start with!*

So it is with Jesus. Everyone is given a day’s provision, those who worked all day and those who worked just a few hours. Like any household with children, the cries of those hired early in the day are oh-so-familiar. “It isn’t fair!” they whine. “We were there first. We deserve more because we did more.” And we glibly reply, “Life isn’t fair.”

Or is it? What Jesus seems to be getting at is that what is fair and what is just is established by God, not by *our* standards of merit, qualifications, and grounds for staking a claim. What is being discussed in the Gospel, as usual, is God's kingdom, God's economy if you will – life lived under the reign of God, a God who is generous to a fault, a God whose generosity can offend us and baffles us.

The temptation is always to assume God serves *our* sense of what is fair, our sense of “justice.” The temptation is always to believe that somehow those who come to the vineyard first and early are more deserving and have stake to a higher claim on God's generosity, love, and forgiveness. The temptation is to believe that we can really earn the right to more than bread that is given daily. An even worse temptation is to think that it is always too late to accept the Master's invitation to work in God's vineyard.

And it is never too soon for the rest of us to begin to consider that heaven's “enough,” heaven's daily bread, and heaven's daily wages make all earthly comparisons look not only petty, but meaningless and silly.

The good news is that God's grace is so great and so surprising that it can provide enough no matter how late in the day it is – on the deathbed, in the jail cell, after repeated failures – because the recipient need not add anything to the grace, but simply receive it in order for it to do its life-sustaining work. Even as the sun sets on this life, it is not too late to accept God's Amazing Grace.

God loves and God gives. We are created in God's image. We are created to love and to give. We are created to be as generous with others as God is with us.

