

Sermon on Matthew 20, 1-16 (The workers in the vineyard), Hannover International Worship, Septuagesimae, February 20, 2011, Petri Church, Hannover-Kleefeld
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*„The kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the market at nine o'clock and saw some men there doing nothing, so he told them `You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will you a fair wage.` So they went. Then at twelve o'clock and at three o'clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o'clock when he went to the market place and saw some other men still standing there. `Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?` he asked them. `No one hired us`, they answered. `Well, then you also go and work in the vineyard`, he told them.
„When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, `Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.`
When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, „These last only worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.`
But he replied to one of them, `Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go! I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?`
And Jesus concluded, „So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last.“*

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the community of the Holy Spirit be with you!

Dear brothers and sisters,
let me begin with a story:

„One day a congregation chartered a boat for a boat-trip on the Ocean. The invited guests were church elders and engaged lay people who were supposed to receive the boat-trip as a gratification for their engagement.

When they arrived at the dock they swarmed aboard and headed for their cabins. A minute later one of them asked to see the captain. „My friend has a much better cabin!“ the man said, to the Captain. „I want a cabin just like his.“ - „Sir“, the Captain replied, „the cabins are identical.“ - „Yeah,“ said the man, „but his cabin looks out on the sea and mine looks out on this old dock!“

The captain ordered to let the man have a cabin which looked out to the oceanside. However, soon when the ship was on the ocean the view out of all cabins was the same... (see Dr. J. H. Pavelko, No comparison)

Most of the time we are rather content with what we have until we compare what we have with someone else has...

1.

However, let's be aware that the focus of the parable of the labourers in the vineyard is not on labour conditions rather than on the good news of the kingdom of the God.

Often Jesus took the everyday life situation of the people to tell about our relation to God. Or probably more accurate: the relation between God and his people – us.

We can be sure that those who listened to what Jesus said knew as well as we know that anyone who pays their workers like the landowner in the story would soon have a difficult time finding workers before late afternoon. Therefore once again: It is not economics the story is talking about - but relation.

In the Near and Middle East as well as in African cultures there was - and still is - a living oral tradition. Telling stories was how people described and explained life. How everything began. What makes sense in life. And if there is a new life after death. The stories were always open. They were an offer to listen, to reflect, to seek and find.

Jesus' stories often took place in the world of the hard-working people, the day labourers and slaves. The story of the workers in the vineyard describes an everyday scene from the working world of those days. Early in the morning unemployed men gather in the market place and wait for the working day. A landowner wants the grapes picked in his vineyard. Typical seasonal work.

In my early childhood, it was just about ten years after the war it was common practice in autumn to gather women and children to harvest potatoes. At that time there were no machines available to do this almost without men's work like it is nowadays.

The potatoes had to be picked up from the earth into a basket and then into sacks and from there onto trailers. It was quite common that school children joined in and earned some money by doing so. I remember when I was ten years old I received 10 DM after a whole weeks labour. And I remember how proud I was!

Back to the situation of the biblical story.

Day labourers were more practical and less expensive for landowners than slaves. Slaves he would have had to buy and then take care for – interested of course in their future exploitation. If you were a slave, you received at least a minimum of bread and care, whereas day labourers were a kind of slaves at their own risk.

Somewhat it reminds on the controversial political discussion about „Zeitarbeit“. There were days without income. There were days of disease. They were born free, but poverty enslaved them just the same. In fact the living conditions of day labourers were more miserable than those of many slaves.

Jesus shows a very precise knowledge of the working conditions of day labourers. He refers to the Hebrew Bible which requires that day labourers will be paid in the evening. And so it happens. Our text supposes that one „denarius“ or silver coin is something like the absolute minimum to survive.

Some of you know that I am related to Ethiopia. In my mind I can see the many women who early in the morning are out to collect firewood and sell it in the evening at the open market. If they are lucky they receive an equivalent to 1 € to make a living for themselves and their children. Some people insist on that begging in the streets guarantees a better daily income.

In our biblical story the landowner hires further labourers in the course of the day. Those hired last only have about an hour's work ahead of them before sunset. They can hardly expect money – perhaps an handful grapes to take home.

And then the evening scene is described. The employer must have completely changed his mind. He shows a totally different attitude than in the beginning. The landowner seems to understand that even those who are unemployed and find little work need the denarius in order to survive. In paying these wages the landowner is going by people's needs rather than by their achievement.

Those who have worked a long time come and protest. They expect their own advantage and not the need of the others. What starts as an everyday scene becomes the overthrow of the current rules of a society orientated to profit.

2.

This story Jesus told teaches to see the misery of the unemployed. To see the pressure of an economy orientated to profit. To see the victims of this economy. Here and now it may not be the market place, where people wait and suffer. It is the offices of the authorities and all the different „Ämter“ which so many even in our society depend on so completely. And be aware that it is not only a matter of physical surviving. It is also - and perhaps mainly - a matter of dignity. It is a matter of dignity seemingly not to be needed in this society.

Our parable encourages people to think that change is possible. It presupposes that whoever hears it, will relate to it and find ways to re-establish dignity and social justice in a similar way as it is established in the story.

It is not only but partly because of such stories that Jesus had to die. Not only because he told them, but because he lived them. He befriended all those who nobody had employed: the poor, the sick, the outcast. And they understood his story best!

They understood: if life is meant to be as in this story, that God acts in solidarity with us human beings then everybody will receive what is necessary to survive but to live life in all fullness. And in dignity. And in peace. No matter how much the individual can achieve or has achieved. If life in our society is meant to be like in this story, then we all have a future to look forward to and a purpose that makes life worth living.

Jesus challenges and provokes but he also comforts the poor and oppressed with his vision of equality and his confirmation of God's goodness and mercy - or „do we begrudge his generosity?“

How much do we need to live in terms of bread, time, freedom, dignity...? These are questions to ask in order to make God's kingdom come true. Be prepared to think again about what is right and just and fair. Be prepared to change your mind about what generosity means.

The meaning of the story goes deeper than the question of what is considered fair. In fact it is a matter of belief. If we want to deal with God on the basis of what we deserve we will not come long.

We are not yet what we are supposed to be.

From the very beginning on we try to achieve what we assume that we deserve and try to accomplish what makes us feel good and great. This is what the bible describes as being separated from the spirit of God. The spirit of His love and creativity and mercy and grace. We are „sinners“ in terms of being separated from God when we believe we can do without him – the source and goal of our life. The bible puts it clear: *„The wages of sin is death.“* Being separated from God is like being dead while we are still alive.

When we live our life consciously we will realize that we do not deserve so much. Instead, we keep on being dependent on others from early childhood on up to the very end. We keep on being dependent on the generosity and love of others and the willingness to forgive us.

Let me finish with what Martin LUTHER had to say on today's gospel:

„When God declares that 'the first will be last' he takes away all your presumptions and forbids you to exalt yourself, even above a whore, even if you were Abraham, David, Peter or Paul.

But when He says, 'the last will be first', he bids you cast off despair and not to regard yourself unfavourable even in comparison with the saints even though you were Pilate, Herod, Sodom and Gomorrah.

For just as we have no reason at all for presumption and boasting, so also we have no reason for despair.

In this way then, all merits are set aside and God's goodness alone is praised... We are all the same in our sin and death, and so we all receive the same grace. Always the kingdom comes by grace to whomever God desires to give it“.

Amen