

**Hannover International Worship
Sermon on September 18th 2011
11.30 Petri Church Hannover/Kleefeld**

Pastor Michael Klatt

Text: Matthew 20, 1- 16

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the world of business today this would simply not work. Those who work for 12 hours get the same wage as the ones who work for just 1 hour. Labour and effort have to be paid according to the time you invest. Apart from the economic disaster which would be inevitable the landowner's decision in the biblical story which we just heard as today's gospel violates our deeply rooted feeling of justice. It is not just, it is just not fair that those who work much less get the same money as those who work a lot more.

Well, we all know that of course the biblical story is a parable of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner...that's how our story starts. However, we in Jamaica thought it was legitimate and challenging at the same time to relate the content of the story to our present time and situation. So, this one morning we all sat down under a huge tree, as we did every morning during the time of bible study. Our bible study group consisted of about 15 people from all over the world, among others from the USA, Jamaica, Switzerland, Norway, Germany and India; as a matter of fact, our facilitator was a Syrian Orthodox Christian from India, a very gentle and knowledgeable person. And we started talking about this parable.

But before I tell you more about our discussion I would like to mention the context in which the topic "peace in the marketplace" was given beforehand by the WCC. In its ecumenical call to just peace the WCC points out the global challenges. I quote: "Even as tiny elites accumulate unimaginable wealth, more than 1.4 billion humans subsist in extreme poverty. There is something profoundly wrong when the wealth of the world's three richest individuals is greater than the gross domestic product of the world's 48 poorest countries...Over-consumption and deprivation are forms of violence. Global military expenditures – now higher than during the Cold War – do little to enhance international peace and security and much to endanger it...Peace in the marketplace is nurtured by creating so called "economies of life". Their essential foundations are equitable socio-economic relationships, respect for workers' rights, the just sharing and sustainable use of resources, healthy and affordable food for all, and broad participation in economic decision-making." End of quote.

All these macro-economic outlines have to be mirrored on the micro-economic level; and that's why we'll now turn back to the landowner's business and the workers in the vineyard. There were some interesting remarks which came up in our reflection on the meaning of this biblical parable.

Somebody from the States told us that it is more than common in big cities like Boston to have market-places where men and women wait the whole day to be picked up by somebody to be employed for a day or even for some hours. They are day labourers just like in biblical times and work under the condition of hire and fire. It's similar to the situation in South-Korea where there are about 1 million migrant workers. Most of them work for so called "3D" jobs which means "dirty, difficult (physically) and dangerous". Many of them work as unskilled labourers in the construction industry. However, many of them have no daily work at all. For them, "give us our daily bread" is not only a prayer in the liturgy, but a matter of life. And I am certain our brothers and sister from Ethiopia could tell us about similar situations in their country, especially now during the months of drought in the horn of Africa where jobs are even scarcer than usual.

Although the material situation is a lot different here in Germany I was when picturing the situation of the people in the market-place reminded of e. g. "Schwarzarbeit", work done on the side, or of the growing number of people here who have, like the day labourers, no proper work-contract or receive low wages which are partly so low that they have to be supplemented by the state, let alone all those who have no job at all. I think that's something worth pointing out that the landowner does care for the jobless. Maybe he has a deep knowledge about the importance of labour. Labour belongs to a human being like flying to birds, as Martin Luther is supposed to have said. If you take labour away from somebody you deprive him of a pivotal part of his existence. We all know how important this is in our time. The need for labour has been reduced more and more due to better technology and due to the pressure of costs. The consequence often is that those who still have a job are forced to work over the limit of their capacity and sometimes even fall ill or struggle with psychological exhaustion.

When the landowner noticed that the work of the day couldn't be finished in time he didn't get out his whip to force the others to work even harder or more quickly but he employed more people. In doing so he not only recognized the importance of labour for these people but also respected their dignity. No matter whether you work long or short hours you have the same dignity; you cannot add anything to your dignity given by God when you work harder. This is also underlined by the fact that everybody gets the same wage, namely 1 denarius at the end of the day. Everybody gets the same, because everybody has the same value in God's eyes.

But there is more to this. A denarius was a little silver coin which was worth 10 asses – the Latin deni means ten. And ten asses were sufficient to get by for one day. It was enough to buy food and drinks for you and your family and to pay the rent. This is an extremely important point as to the topical discussion on how high or low the wages nowadays have to

be. Not all that long ago the Federal Constitutional Court in Karlsruhe when having to pass judgement on the level of the so called Hartz IV regulations stated that everybody's wage has to cover the need for a humane subsistence level. With reference to our biblical story we can say that this was not only a wise but also a very biblical decision.

But not everything that the landowner did was good. I think he has also partly to be criticised. What was his answer again towards the end when those who had worked all day grumbled? He said: Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Does this mean that somebody's wage depends on the employer's grace or on his arbitrary use of power? It is exactly this attitude which led to the abolishment of trade unions in the US-state of Indiana as one of the members of our bible study told us. "We don't need trade unions because we will set the price" argued the employers and the politicians. This cannot be the solution. The partnerships between employers and unions as well as codetermination have turned out to be very successful in our country. They are a reliable factor of success and of social peace in our social market system.

At the end of our reflection on this biblical story one question remained open which we weren't really able to answer: What is more difficult: To work in the vineyard the whole day or to stand idle in the market-place the whole day? What do you think?

Well, what can we learn from this parable for us today? One thing is for sure: Everything is priced in the market, even human beings. In this context it is good and healing to be reminded that a totally different market exists in the kingdom of God where we are cared for and where we are provided with everything we need for life, and even more, we will have the fullness of life as Jesus promised. "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" (Matthew 6, 26)

This vision of life-giving economy out of God's abundant economy is encouraging and challenging at the same time. But perhaps it is so encouraging that it stimulates people to unexpected action such as that which was told by Lothar Zenetti, a German Catholic theologian and writer. His version of our biblical story goes like this:

After the day was over the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman: "Call the workers and pay them their wages and take into consideration that some worked all day, others only an hour." So the foreman gave those who had worked all day one denarius as agreed upon. The others got less according to the shorter time they had worked. The wages were paid justly and everybody seemed to be content. Except the ones who had worked only an hour. They had so little that they couldn't buy bread to feed their family. When one of those who had worked all day saw how little the others got, he said: "Well, let's prove what solidarity means to us and let's show that the individual human being counts more than that which he

has achieved. My proposal is to put all the money together. And then everybody should get the same share." Everybody agreed and they shared what they had. Everybody got exactly the same amount. Not much wonder that this news spread quickly in the little town. Of course this action was heavily criticized by some. They said: "That's not on. Where does it lead to when the last get the same as the first, when achievement doesn't count any more?" But the workers answered: "It is our decision that all have the same. We want the last to have the same amount of money as the first. Don't we have the right to do what we want with our own money? Or are you envious because we are respectful of each other and exercise solidarity?"

May God grant us enough courage and power over and over again to try and bring God's economy into line with our current system of economy on a personal level, but also on a national and global level.

And may the peace of God which transcends all understanding, guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus,

Amen