

**When We Enter the World of Parables (P-18-05 A pr20)**

**Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliott, Jr**

When we enter the world of parables we, sometimes, find ourselves in *Alice in Wonderland* country, where things just get *curiouser and curiouser* as Alice put it. Sowers waste seed on rocks and paths and even thorny ground, but still reap a splendid harvest. Shepherds abandon their flocks to look for one stray lamb and find it. But in this parable of *Workers in the Vineyard*, we encounter the most curious situation of all. In our right-side-up world, people are fighting for equal pay for equal work, if they aren't fighting to keep a job. But in this parable that basic principal is ignored and we have to wonder about equity and justice in that man's vineyard.

The work day was 12 hours....6 AM to 6 PM, so when the parable tells of additional hiring at the 3<sup>d</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> hours, it really is speaking of 9AM, 12 Noon, 3PM and 5PM, one hour before quitting time. The wage for those who signed on for the whole day was one denarius. The next three groups were hired with the promise that they would be paid whatever was right; the last group heard no mention of pay, but they went to work anyway. At the end of the work day, the householder has his steward pay off the workers, starting with those who were hired at five o'clock.

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Everybody got the same wage, no matter what time they signed on. Needless to say, the day-long workers are more than a little angry. They don't like it one bit and we can sympathize. It looks like a case of gross injustice, not to mention extravagance. This householder obviously has never been on a vestry or a finance committee.

What was the message of Jesus here? One interpretation is that Jesus is saying that there's a place for everybody in the Kingdom of God. We are not merely given an assurance of security, but are called to a great enterprise. We may have been on the outside before, but now we are at the center of activity that has meaning. The Church when it is at its best, always sees possibilities in people where the world is blind to them. It offers that strange experience that is deeper than happiness; it offers the peace which the world can neither create nor prevent, and most times, not even understand.

And then Jesus is saying that it's never too late. This is good news. Life is full of missed opportunities which will not come again. We can get into the habit of looking backward and be

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overwhelmed by the number of missed opportunities. This vain regretting can easily become the dominating pattern of our lives. But the door to the Kingdom is always open. It may not be the door we had in mind, but the Christian discovers that, even late in the day, she or he is called into service. Finding one's place in the eternal scheme of things is the greatest discovery of all. To grow older in body and mind, yet never grow cynical and sad is more than we dare ask for.

Then there is the suggestion that just because we have labored in the vineyard all the day long, we are not entitled to preferment. Seniority is not enough. Faithfulness is the essential virtue, but it must be a faithfulness that is alive and sharp, full of vision, enthusiastic, fresh. Our faith is dying when it becomes wearisome and merely routine. When that happens we have forgotten what the Church is.

These are just a few interpretations of the parable of "workers in the vineyard," adequate perhaps, but not completely satisfying. The parable has only **one point**. We don't have to try to find a meaning for each of the details. The estate owner is not God, nor

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are the earliest workers “cradle Christians,” nor are those who went to work at five o’clock death bed converts. Jesus was telling a simple agricultural story whose meaning was not in the details, but in the story itself. In the Father’s Kingdom *all are equally loved*. Human standards are not to be used to measure God’s generosity. And the generosity of God’s love is what this parable is all about.

We can be bothered by it because God’s goodness is an affront to our level headedness, and because God’s love of sinners is an insult to the pious. But in the Kingdom we are in the realm of goodness, mercy and gratuitous self-giving. We are liberated from the world of rights, profit and fair exchange. In the Kingdom we see the difference between our little stab at justice and God’s stroke of grace. We want to show the world that the law of calculation has been abolished and we now live by grace.

Grace....that mysterious miracle that Scott Peck so knowingly wrote of in *The Road Less Traveled* (pp 306-311)....that gift God gives to us, withheld when we seek it, given when we may least desire it; that gift that replaces pride with the peace of the humble.

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We can prepare ourselves for the coming of God's grace if we can make ourselves totally disciplined, completely loving individuals with no thought or hope of reward, and in so doing, the reward of God's love, which we have not sought, will find us. We should know and understand that we live our lives at the center of God's vision, at the center of his concern, not on the fringes, not at the periphery. Indeed, the hub of **every** parable is God in Christ, and God's yearning for all of us to live by the Gospel. When we do this, we, like Jesus himself, and like the parable of the generous landowner, will be a sign of wonder and contradiction to a bewildered world.

**AMEN.**