

Year A - 16th After Pentecost – 24 September 2017  
Matthew 20:1-16

When I was in grade ten there was a girl in my class who had been the bane of my existence for the previous three years. She was an excellent student, always on the Principal's Honour role. She was good at all sports, winning awards and being named to city all-star teams every season. She even went to church. She was just annoying. It seemed that no matter what I did well, she could do it better and she was always recognized for her achievements. And I was left to take home a good grade or notice of accomplishment to my parents who had two other children to share their time and devotion with. It never seemed fair that I could do well, I could excel in something and still receive no standing ovations, no public pats on the back, while others could just blink and be applauded. At least that's what it seemed like when I was 15 years old.

Then one day I found out that my archrival's father had died. She was only about 23 years old and her father was dead. Suddenly, those years of pettiness and jealousy came back to hit me full in the face. What good were trophies and public recognition when coming home would mean difficult memories and a loneliness almost too painful to bear? What did it matter that she had been blessed by God with a myriad of talents and interests when she had to face the most difficult loss in her young life?

Many times, in my 43 years God has taught me lessons about perspective, but never was a lesson driven home so succinctly. This classmate of mine, whom I had been secretly harbouring a grudge against all of these years, became someone for whom I prayed and wished only the best, seemingly overnight, and all because my perspective had shifted drastically.

When I found out about her father's death, it occurred to me that beating her in grades or winning a trophy away from her would never have replaced the time I have yet to share with my family, with my dad. If our roles were reversed, I would much rather be an average student who didn't excel in anything but still have my dad around on holidays and at the end of the telephone line, than have the memories of my dad cheering me on to win and congratulating me on past successes but not there to say I love you to in the future.

While this situation is a horrible one, I know that the person who was my archrival has dealt with it well. She was given a strength by God at an early age that has developed into a faith that can carry her through every day. I also know that I couldn't have dealt with it as well as she has. I have come to realize that God chooses different things for each of us and it is our place to learn how to live with the choices God makes for us, in their totality, rather than to wish away our lives, blaspheming others for what we *don't* have and ignoring the gifts that we *do* have.

Today we have heard the parable of the landowner that called people throughout the day to come and work for him. Each man was paid a day's wage regardless of when he started to work. The men who began work earlier in the day were angry that those who did not work as long as they, received an equal portion.

Consider this story from their perspective. They were willing and able to work for a full day. They lined up first thing in the morning. They laboured in the vineyard from sunrise to sunset so that they could make enough money to feed their families, keep a roof over their heads, pay some bills. They deserved every cent that they received. No wonder they were angry when the workers who started closer to the end of the day received the same wage. It wasn't fair. A day's wage for a day's work, that's the way it's supposed to be. It sounds like they were justified in their anger.

Now let's look at this from a different perspective - the labourers who were hired later in the day. We don't know why these folks weren't hired in the first place. Maybe they were too late getting to the marketplace, or maybe the landowner underestimated how much help he would need. The gospel is fairly clear though that *why* they weren't hired until later is not important. What is important is that they were willing to work when they were offered the opportunity.

From the perspective of the later workers what can we glean? What did they expect of their day? We know what they probably *didn't* expect. They most likely were not anticipating being paid for a full day's work. When we listen to this parable we often hear most clearly what the all-day workers heard: that every labourer, regardless of how long he worked, received a full day's wages. But we tend to overlook something else. We don't listen as closely to the original offer that was made to the later workers.

"When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So, they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'"

Nowhere did the landowner offer the later workers a full day's wages. He offered the labourers who came in the middle of the day to pay them *whatever was right*. The ones who were hired last were not offered payment at all! They were willing to go to work for whatever remained of the day and be paid an undisclosed amount of money. That takes some kind of faith or fear or something that only the desperate or the faithful will accept!

How many of us would enter into a difficult work situation, a day of hard and laborious back-breaking work, without even having a clue as to what the minimum pay would be? In this day and age when everything is negotiated and agreed upon, that would be almost unheard of. Yet in this situation the workers were just so happy to be able to work and receive something for it, especially when it looked like all hope of a day's pay was lost, that they were willing to go to work late in the day and for no specific amount of money, only the promise of being paid "whatever was right". They had to place their trust in the man who hired them that he would not cheat them in the end.

As we go about our lives, especially the Monday to Saturday parts, we run into experiences like this all the time. People who work little or not at all but still receive funding from the government. CEO's of corporations and politicians who negotiate their own huge salary increases. Then there are the people who work hard, probably struggling to make ends meet and hoping that their numbers might come up in the lottery. It doesn't seem fair. We're either on one end of the stick or the other, and chances are, if you're anything like me, that you feel more like the one who worked hard all day than you do the one who got paid a full day's wage for only a few hours work.

It's easy to relate to this story, isn't it? But should it be? Maybe we're being challenged by God to check out a new perspective? Maybe it's not about money or working hard or recognition of whom deserves what, at all. Maybe it's about recognizing God's hand in our lives and paying attention to our *own* day in God's vineyard rather than focusing on someone else's.

For a lot of years, I allowed myself to harbour ill will for another human being simply because God made her smarter and more talented than he made me. Maybe I should have spent more time

focusing on those talents that God *had* given me but I was too blinded by jealousy to recognize. My archrival seemed to have been asked to work in the vineyard for the whole day, and God appeared to have left me standing out in the marketplace for a while. The most important thing for *me* to recognize was not what God seemed to be doing in *her* life, but what God had been doing all along in *my* life.

The second most important thing I should have realized is that God did not create a competition between us. God did not set us on earth to be measuring sticks for one another, or more accurately, for *her* to be *my* measuring stick. God placed us both on earth to exercise certain ministries - ministries that are as unique and different as we are unique and different.

When I look back on who she and I were and who we have become, I can recognize the many ways that God was preparing us for the lives that he wanted us to live. She learned about her talents at a much younger age and they led her into experiences, which strengthened her mind as well as her soul. The circumstances of her life have tested that strength. All of the work that God called her in for early in the morning has prepared her for a life that will be filled with riches and blessings but will always be without her father.

Her life has many, many blessings and gifts that I can only dream about but my life is full in different ways, just the way God planned it. I have undergone other tests and trials to get to where I am today. My perspective on my life has changed over the years and I am glad that God has changed it. I am learning the truth that the landowner spoke when he said, "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 imagine that we all struggle with the human desire to have everything 'fair' and even across the board, but as Christians we must embrace a different truth. We should recognize that what is considered fair by humankind is often considered ridiculous by God. After all, at the end of your days would you rather receive what you deserve based on how much and how long you truly loved and served God? Or would you rather receive all that God offers to you *despite* how long you truly loved and served God?

We have all experienced times when we have wanted what others have and chances are, that at times others have wanted what we have. Ours is not to place our dreams and hopes and desires in what our fellow workers have been given, but to place our dreams and hopes and desires in the promises that God makes to us as a generous and loving Father. And that's a perspective that's as easy on the eyes as it is on the heart.