

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 20:1-16

Imagine this scenario, if you will. Two people die on the same day -- one is a lifelong Christian and the other is a "deathbed convert" to Christianity. The lifelong Christian went to church faithfully, and, of course, was baptized, confirmed, attended Bible study, and taught Sunday School. The other...well...we might say didn't do these things. As a matter of fact, much of this person's life was spent -- apart from work -- carousing and not giving much attention to any-thing spiritual. But, in those final hours of life, this person makes a confession of faith, is baptized, hears the words of Scripture, receives the Eucharist, and is just as much a member of the church as anyone else is...or ever was!

It might be helpful, at this time, for us to look at our Catechism, specifically page 858 of the Prayer Book, with a focus on the answer to the question, "What is grace?" The Catechism states, "Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills." With that definition, let us now think about the means of grace -- those means by which this grace comes to us...means that function as channels of salvation, administered by the Church in order to, among other things, save folks like you and me from a much unhappier fate. In the most basic sense, all of you here today are receiving the means of grace -- you have heard the good news of the Gospel through the Scriptures, you will be absolved of your sins in a rite of confession, and you will receive our Lord's Body and Blood in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. These are all means of God's grace by which we receive salvation, or eternal life with our Lord in the kingdom of heaven.

The received teachings of the Church, growing out of Scripture and the Christian tradition, maintained that those who knowingly excluded themselves from the means of grace would not receive salvation. To put it bluntly, non-churchgoers would go to hell. For a number of reasons that are far too complicated to explain right now, our particular segment of the Church has soft-pedaled any ideas that would suggest that non-churchgoers will go to hell. We have, as an old song put it, chosen to "accentuate the positive" and "eliminate the negative."

But what if we were to follow the historic teachings of the Church, particularly in regard to the hypothetical person's deathbed conversion? Well, that person, so it seems, would be saved because the "minimum basic requirements" were met. The means of grace were received -- Baptism, the promise of Scripture, and the Holy Eucharist. Even though this person had knowingly refused the means of grace for a long, long time, had spent a lifetime in "dissolute living," and hadn't done much more than work or goof off, this singular deathbed conversion ought to guarantee the same salvation granted to a lifelong Christian.

And no, I'm not talking about a lifelong Christian who also happened to be a serial killer; I'm talking about a lifelong Christian somewhat along the lines of my Grandma Helen, who never swore, drank, cursed, played cards or killed anything. You see, somehow, there's a question of fairness that would bug us. We are stuck in a mindset that tells us that salvation is intended for the deserving...for those who have "put in their time." Those who haven't...well, we're tempted to think that God ought to still punish them because they conveniently "found God" in their dying hours.

Of all the verses of Scripture and sayings of Jesus that might shake us out of this mindset, today's Gospel text is the finest example. Four sets of laborers are hired to work in a landowner's vineyard, each hired at different times of the

day, but the ones hired in the late afternoon are paid the same amount of money as those who worked all day. This, obviously, doesn't sit well with the laborers who put in considerably more time, only to see other "less deserving" laborers earn just as much. Quite frankly, I can understand their frustration!

Children grasp the concept of fairness at an early age, and, when around parents and siblings, children monitor their parents' execution of fairness very closely. I, for one, can recall either my sister or myself saying "that's not fair" to this, that, or the other, only to have Dad turn around and say, "Life's not fair." Not a particularly satisfying response back then...

But is the parable of the laborers in the vineyard an example of "life's not fair" to which we must resign ourselves? I would hope not. I would hope that we can "hear" this parable in a different way...that if we had to earn every blessing we received, we would be in big trouble. Actually, the Christian life is substantially different from the "payment for services rendered" schema with which we are most familiar. Just looking around the church this morning, I can point out the fact that you neither earn nor deserve Baptism, you neither earn nor deserve forgiveness, and you neither earn nor deserve a place at the Lord's Table. In this place, a "laborer" who shows up a half an hour late receives exactly the same as you receive. And yes, I know that this isn't the way the rest of the world works, but that's what the good news is all about!

It's good news to know that one who says "Jesus Christ is Lord" for the first time on one's deathbed gets the same spot in heaven as the one who's done it for a lifetime! Why? Well, think about a less dramatic situation. You're relatively young and you receive an inheritance of a considerable amount of money. You don't think to yourself, "Boy, I sure deserved this because I'm just such a wonderful person." On the contrary, you're amazed that something so undeserved could come

upon you. You're simply thankful for your good fortune and are (hopefully) inspired to share this great blessing with others.

But then, human nature will rear its ugly head among your peers. They may be filled with jealousy and resentment because you didn't earn that money with your own backbreaking toil and sweat. To them, you are the laborer who shows up at five in the afternoon and receives just as much -- if not more -- money as they did after working since the crack of dawn. In this case, the sin of envy may, indeed, consume a person. Remember what the landowner asked the laborers who thought they'd been cheated: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15). That which is given to a recipient is the sole business of the giver and the recipient; to meddle in (or worry about) their business is to be nosy, envious, immature, and petty. Again, sin can get the better of a person in a situation like this...

The landowner's example, ultimately, is one of impartiality. And that is the hardest thing for any of us -- laborers included -- to wrap our minds around. But the Gospel message jolts us out of our conventional understandings of fairness and justice and offers us things like mercy and forgiveness, which isn't to say that fairness and justice can't live together with mercy and forgiveness; rather, we simply assign a greater value to things we receive than to things we deserve. The free gift of God's grace is more mind-blowingly amazing than the just payment for work performed. And when God gives gifts, God's mercy is revealed, again, in impartiality. God might not give us what we deserve, and, if you think about it, that might be a good thing.

The apostle Paul says, too, that "God shows no partiality" (Romans 2:11). To expect God to be partial to the "deserving" would get us back into the trap of thinking that God rewards people according to their merits. And one might think,

too, that God is more than capable of doing amazing, surprising, and unconventional things -- like saving people who don't necessarily "deserve" to be saved and making the first last and the last first. This may not all make sense in the way we'd like it to, but, in the end, it'll probably work out to our benefit. How much of our own sins and shortcomings are we unaware of? It's easy to point cynically at the person converting to Christianity on the deathbed, but what about the ways in which we have apparently dishonored God just as profoundly? Isn't it good to know that God will be impartial to us, too?

When the labors in our vineyards are complete, may we take it as an opportunity not to lament the unfairness of another person's reward, but rather to rejoice in the reward that we ourselves have been given. Certainly, the last can be first, but how that shakes out is, ultimately, God's prerogative, not ours. Think, too, of how peaceful it can be to focus on your own journey with the Lord more than worrying about the journeys of others. Don't lose sight of what God is doing in your lives just because you're preoccupied with someone else's!

Indeed, God is giving us good things all the time, and, best of all, God is preparing a place for us in the kingdom of heaven. But how God works out the details of who enters into this kingdom and who doesn't is not something that works according to conventional wisdom. If latecomers to the workday can receive a full day's pay, just think about what that might look like when God calls us all home.

It should be mighty interesting...

Amen.