

**EQUALITY**  
*Sermon for Pentecost 16A, Proper 20-Mt 20:1-16*  
LPC, 9/24/17

Who do you consider your equal? Oh, I know we are all supposed to be equal. It's in the American Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." Of course those ringing words were penned by a person who owned people. And the extent to which the equality of men includes women is unclear. But we are all supposed to be equal.

There are plenty of instances where people are not equal, however. If I am interviewing a new secretary, for example, it is apparent that not all the applicants are equal, and I am going to compare resumes and interviews and hire the very best person I can.

And, too, competition is part of human nature. We can't help it. I imagine the most primitive humans held foot races to see who was fastest. There is certainly no harm in good-natured competitive sports, and they may even serve to channel aggression in constructive ways.

In the marketplace, in science and in the arts, competition has fostered creativity, originality, innovation, and progress. This is all because things and people are not equal. Some things work better than others. Some people are better at certain tasks than others. A great deal of human activity is based on the relative worth of one thing over another, of one person over another.

This is so much part of our consciousness that it is hard for us to imagine a situation where true equality is the rule. Competition seeps into a lot of our relationships and interactions. I have a relative, the most mild and tolerant of people under other circumstances, who in a restaurant cannot help noticing when another party, who has arrived after us, is served before us.

Then there is the silent variety of competition. Many of us constantly compare ourselves mentally with others. In the gym, at the beach, and in other public places we are exquisitely aware of which bodies are better than ours and which are worse. In group discussions we can usually identify who around the table we are smarter than.

Into this human situation, Jesus tells us the first will be last and the last will be first. Jesus says this kind of thing a lot, so it must be important. What does it mean to us?

In the lesson we heard today from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable to illustrate this theme, of the last and the first trading places. In today's story a landowner hires laborers at various times of day to work in his vineyard. This type of hiring still goes on in some locales. In my old neighborhood there were specified street corners with signs saying "*busca trabajadores?*" which is Spanish for "Do you need workers?" Day laborers congregate in these places waiting for employers to drive up in vans and collect the workers they need for the day.

At any rate, each time this landowner returns to his local *busca trabajadores* site, at 9am, noon, 3pm and 5pm, he picks up more laborers, agreeing to pay them all the standard daily wage of a denarius. At sundown, pay is distributed, beginning with the five-o'clockers, the last to arrive. Upon seeing that those who had worked only an hour receive a full day's pay, those who

had worked nine hours assume they will be paid proportionately more. After all, they had worked nine times as long. But when the nine-o'clockers' turn comes, they too receive a denarius. So of course they complain.

This makes sense, doesn't it? Those who work nine times as long should receive nine times as much, shouldn't they? That is a logical way of looking at this situation. But Jesus invites us to look at it another way.

In the first place, a denarius was truly a fair wage. Nobody really needed more than a denarius a day to live comfortably. Try not to superimpose upon this story the modern wisdom of saving for a rainy day. For the sake of this story alone, imagine it is possible to have all your daily needs met. The laborers in this story have all their needs met. They really don't need and can't really use the additional pay they demand.

Secondly, keep in mind that the landowner has actually been completely honest and faithful. He has paid each worker exactly what he promised to.

Thirdly, as Jesus himself has explained this is not a description of a typical human situation. This is the kingdom of heaven.

As I have said many times the kingdom of heaven is not just where we go when we die. The kingdom of heaven is wherever and whenever God reigns: wherever and whenever God's dream of a perfected creation becomes real. God's reign is personified by Jesus Christ, who loved, forgave, liberated, fed and healed. Insofar as we participate in these Christ-like activities, we participate in the kingdom of heaven in the here-and-now.

The promised wages for working in the vineyard are a denarius. The promised wages for working in the kingdom of heaven are love, forgiveness, liberation, sustenance and healing: in other words, salvation. In other words, abundant life. God offers love, forgiveness, liberation, sustenance and healing. That is really all we need. Do we have a right to demand more love, forgiveness, liberation, sustenance and healing than our brothers and sisters when each of us has all we can use?

As I mentioned last week, the section of Matthew's Gospel we have been reading for the last few weeks addresses what it is to follow Jesus in community: how to be church, in other words. Matthew's original community probably consisted of people who followed Jesus from the very beginning as well as some Johnny-come-latelies. Perhaps Matthew was facing a situation where long-time disciples expected special treatment owing to their seniority in the community.

In a situation like this, Matthew's church was being called to remember that what Christians are about is not competitive human life as usual. What we are about is the kingdom of heaven, where there is enough love, forgiveness, liberation, sustenance and healing for everybody. And that means everybody.

Like the love of a good parent, God's love is not a zero-sum commodity. Sharing God's love with our brothers and sisters does not mean there is less for us. When we really believe that we have all we will ever need in that department, we will compete with, but be generous with God's other children. This is what equality is in the kingdom of heaven. And it begins now.