

5:00 O'Clock Workers

September 21, 2008

(Pentecost 19 - Year A)

Matthew 20: 1-16

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

When I was the Chief Financial Officer of an employee benefit and trust company in Houston, the compensation package for myself, and for the other 5 people on the senior management team, was a closely guarded secret.

Our compensation was evaluated at the conclusion of the annual board of directors meeting, when they excused those of us on the senior management team and held a closed door session to discuss our compensation.

At this closed door meeting, the board of directors were given a spreadsheet.

This spreadsheet detailed my compensation history and that of the other 5 people on the senior management team.

And next to each of our names was a blank line.

This blank line would be filled in by the board of directors during their closed door meeting, as they evaluated each of the 6 members of the senior management team and our performance.

And the amount that the board of directors wrote in that blank line would then be our salary for the coming year.

After this confidential sheet was filled out and signed by the board, it was put into a sealed envelope and given to the CEO of the company, who was my boss.

Every year, immediately after the board of directors meeting, was a very nice dinner at a local country club.

During the cocktail hour, the CEO would always find me and pull me aside.

Because I was the CFO, he would then pull the sealed envelope out of his coat pocket and hand it to me.

As he handed the envelope to me, I was anxious to find out what my

salary - and the salary of my colleagues - was going to be for the coming year.

So, I would quietly sneak away into a corner, quickly open the envelope, take a look at the amounts, then slip the envelope back into my coat pocket.

Every year that I went through this process, no matter how high my raise was, I always found myself thinking that I deserved more.

I always found myself comparing myself to other people, wondering why it was that the Vice President of Marketing, who took off every Friday afternoon to play golf, got a 10% raise, while I got a 5% raise.

As I opened that envelope every year in a corner of the Houston Country Club, I always found myself becoming angry, Angry because I thought that I had worked in the vineyard since the crack of dawn, and I felt that I deserved a whole lot more than anyone else.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner of a vineyard. The landowner of the vineyard gets up at the crack of dawn and gets in his truck to pick up workers at 6 o'clock in the morning.

The landowner agrees to pay the workers for one day's worth of work. Then, at 9 o'clock in the morning, the landowner goes back out in his truck, he goes back at noon, and at 3 o'clock, and he goes back at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, to pick up more workers who will pick grapes in his vineyard.

At the end of the day, the landowner goes into a closed door session and decides the compensation for each of his workers.

For the workers who arrived at 5 o'clock, he writes \$200 in the blank lines beside their names.

For the workers who arrived at 9 o'clock, at noon and at 3 o'clock and even the workers who arrived at 6 in the morning, who have sweated in the hot sun, he looks at the blank line beside all their names and he writes in \$200, \$200, \$200, the same amount as everyone else.

When the 5 o'clock workers open the sealed envelope, they are ecstatic. However, when the 6 AM workers see the spreadsheet, prepared to be rewarded justly for their hard work, they are ticked off, because they feel that they deserve more than everyone else.

For some reason, this parable of Jesus makes us angry.

For some reason, most of us immediately identify with the workers who worked in the vineyard all day, yet get cheated out of a just wage for a full day's work.

However, it is my belief that Jesus doesn't think that *any of us* have worked in the vineyard since 6 o'clock in the morning and worked all day in the hot sun.

For I believe that all of us have gotten to work late, at 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

Yet somehow we have the audacity to think that we are perfect workers for God.

Somehow, we have the audacity to think that we get up at the crack of dawn for God, that we labor without rest for God, that we are deserving of God's biggest compensation package.

Instead, my experience of working in God's kingdom is that we come into work late, making excuses about our alarm clock not going off,

Then slip into the back pews.

My experience of working in God's kingdom is that we goof off by taking long coffee breaks away from our desks,

Taking long breaks away from conversation with God in intentional and daily prayer.

My experience of working in God's kingdom is that we play solitaire on our computers, quickly minimizing the game when our boss walks by -

And then pretend that we are reading our Bibles that we haven't picked up in months or years.

And then we have the audacity, the audacity, when we hear Jesus'

parable, to identify with the workers who arrive at 6 o'clock in the morning and bust their behinds all day for God in the blazing sun.

For it is my belief - that none of us, none of us, have been doing outstanding work in God's vineyard since 6 o'clock in the morning.

All of us are slackers, slackers who have been picked up by the truck at 5 o'clock in the afternoon, only by the grace and mercy of God.

And the good news of God - the great news - is that even though all of us are slackers,

God has looked at each one of our names on the spreadsheet - and written down an amount that is equal and extravagant.

God has written in that blank beside each of our names:

I love you, I love you, I love you.

And this morning, God is picking up another worker for God's kingdom. We are baptizing Addison Yandle to work in God's vineyard.

And I can predict right now that little Addison will not be a perfect, "6-o'clock-in-the-morning" kind of worker.

She will use God's corporate credit card for personal purchases - instead of giving to the poor.

She will gossip about her co-workers in the women's restroom.

She will take God's office supplies home with her at night out of a sense of false entitlement for God's creation.

But, when Addison's boss hands her that sealed envelope, she will discover the good news -

The good news that she is a worker in the vineyard who is loved just the same as everyone else.

For the good news of Jesus Christ is this:

Thank God, thank God, that God does *not* give us what we deserve.

Thank God that God gives us the love that we *don't* deserve.

Right now, it's quarter 'til 5 in the afternoon.

The sun is low and the truck is kickin' up dust as it comes down the road.

Climb in and ride with me to the vineyard to work for our God.

The work is hard and back-breaking - and you won't get what you deserve.

But, some folks tell me:

The compensation package is out of this world.

AMEN.

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