

The parable in the gospel this morning is probably a familiar one to most of us. The owner of a field hires some laborers to work his field for the usual day-rate. Throughout the day, he hires more workers to work for shorter and shorter bits of time, and when the end of the day comes, they all get the same pay. The workers who labored all day get angry and complain that this is ‘not fair’ to them. The owner reminds them that they agreed to the price and that it’s not really any of their business if he decides to be generous to the other workers.

Now, in my experience growing up in the church, the parable, taken on its own, often got interpreted as a commentary on salvation. We are saved by grace, not by works. Eternal life is a gift God gives generously, not one that we can earn. Salvation is open to all of us and we should be grateful! And there’s truth to this way of reading the passage, but – as sometimes happens with the way the lectionary divides up our readings – we’re missing some of the context that gives this parable its depth and meaning. So let’s zoom out a bit.

Jesus tells this parable to his disciples as part of the answer to a question. He has just gotten done telling them that ‘it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God’. The disciples are shocked. They understood wealth as a sign of God’s favor, as the result of obedience, not as an obstacle to faithfulness. Peter, always the first to speak, asks Jesus a pointed question – ‘Look, we have given up everything, our security, our possessions, whatever wealth we had, to follow you. What will we have in return after all of this?’

In response, Jesus promises that the 12 disciples will receive a glorious inheritance, that they will sit on thrones to judge the 12 tribes of Israel – that *anyone* who leaves behind their security or their community to follow Jesus will receive abundance, a hundredfold in return. A new community, a new security, a new, *eternal* life. “But,” Jesus warns, “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Then our parable begins. Just after our parable, Jesus will tell the disciples that ‘whoever wishes to be great among them must be their servant,’ that ‘greatness’ in the kingdom of God will be measured by humility, service, and sacrifice for others. So the last will be first and the first will be last.

Like the disciples, we live in a culture of effort and security, a world where value is earned and accumulated. In our various ways, we believe that we must work for acceptance, for

security, for love – and that once we have worked for it, it belongs to us fair & square. In God's kingdom, on the other hand, all these things are freely received and freely given. We simply *are* loved and valued, and a trustworthy God will provide for our needs even when things get tough, giving us our daily bread like manna in the desert.

With all this context in mind, I think today's parable reads as a warning to the disciples, that the temptations of our world are going to creep into the new people of God that the disciples will help establish. Even if they let go of the temptation to accumulate wealth and security, they will still be tempted, as we all are, to forget that the love of God is freely received and freely given.

Instead of rejoicing when others receive the gift of God's love, they will be tempted to compare themselves to those that will come along and join the growing church. Instead of welcoming others and remaining open to the change that God might be inviting them into, they will be tempted to cling to their hard work, their sacrifices for God, their ideas and principles – to believe that they are entitled to a greater status in their community – instead of being willing to meet God and witness his generosity through others. If you've read Acts or the epistles, you know that this is exactly the issue the disciples face as gentiles begin to join the church.

But Jesus insists that the only way to be 'great' in God's kingdom, is to let go of all that. To make ourselves servants – to so turn our attention towards the joy of loving others that we forget about what is 'fair' and let go of what we believe we are owed. Jesus' warning is also an invitation to step out of the logic of 'fairness' and into the economy of God's kingdom. An invitation to join the Israelites in the desert, to learn with them that being a part of God's people means relying on God's provision, trusting that God loves us and will care for us, and that our striving only distracts us from that fundamental gift.

May the Holy Spirit give us the courage this morning to trust that God will always provide enough. And – as Jesus promised the disciples – may we discover that when we entrust ourselves to God and give ourselves to caring for one another, that daily bread, that *enough* might actually be *abundance*.