

Blessed in the Vineyard: Matthew 20:1-16

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You know a whole lot of us Christians spend a whole lot of time, talking a whole lot, about a whole lot of stuff, that Jesus hardly ever talked about at all. And frankly many of us spend very little time, talking very much at all, about things Jesus talked about pretty much all the time.

The kingdom of God is such a thing- one of those things that we don't tend to talk about all that much but Jesus talked about almost constantly.

We see it in Jesus' inaugural address in the very first chapter of Mark (the very first Gospel to be written). The very first recorded words of Jesus. "The kingdom of God is at hand" Jesus says, "repent and believe the good news".

The kingdom is the object of many, if not most, of Jesus' parables. The kingdom of God is like this, he says. The kingdom of God is sort of like that.

When Jesus talks about the kingdom it is almost always about a present and yet still coming reality *here*, and not so much about a place we go to after we die. Jesus actually said very little about "going to" heaven.

When he taught his disciples to pray, it was "thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven". The direction is from heaven here, not the other way around. As John Dominick Crossan reminds us "Heaven's in great shape. Earth is where the problems are."

Now it's not that Jesus didn't believe in an after-life, he most certainly did. It just seems that he didn't think that that was something we needed to worry so much about, or at least not focus so much on.

The text that we read this morning is the second half really of a two-part story that Matthew tells about the kingdom and who it belongs to and who belongs in it.

It starts in the previous chapter with another familiar story, the story of a man, a rich man we are told. He is a man of privilege, no doubt. But he is also a good man, or at least he tries very hard to be, for he follows the faith of his people and he obeys all the commandments. He hardly ever does anything.....wrong.

But even he knows that it is not enough and he senses that there is something missing in his life- that there must be something more than this. He sees a peace and completeness in Jesus and he hopes that just maybe he can find his answer here and so he asks Jesus what it is that he still lacks.

Well Jesus of course sees right to the heart of the matter and he knows what is getting in the man's way. Jesus knows what is occupying him but not filling him. Jesus knows that his privilege puts him above others rather than alongside of them and, you see, above and below relationships are not how it is in the kingdom.

So he tells the man to sell all he has and give it to the poor- to stop following the money and to start following him. And then we read what just might be one of the most poignant lines in all of scripture. The man "went away sad" we are told. "He went away sad". The man came to Jesus, who had all the answers to everything he sought but yet still he went away sad.

He went away sad, with a God shaped hole still in his soul, for he was a man of privilege, and surely we know, more than most, just how seductive that can be and just how hard it is to give it up.

Surely we know, even more than most, just how easy it is to think that we earned a special place and just how tempting it is to feel that we deserve it.

And as Jesus watches the man walk away, sad...we can almost hear the sorrow in his own heart as he says to the disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom. Easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle".

Now this kind of talk frightens the disciples for you see they sort of think that they are privileged too, for they are the original twelve disciples after all. "We have left everything to follow you!" they complain. "What then will there be for us?"

Jesus patiently tries to reassure them that anyone who has sacrificed much will receive much... but not necessarily any more than anyone else. "Many who are first will be last," he tells them, "and many who are last will be first." It's not that they will be left out at all, it's just that the usual "pecking order" may not apply.

They will have a seat at the table in God's kingdom, yes, but it will be a big table and many others will be there too, and there will be no sterling silver name plates or fluffy cushions for the special few. We all have a place at the table in the kingdom, yes- place but not privilege.

And then this two-part lesson continues with the text we just read as Jesus illuminates the point, the way he almost always does, by telling a story, a teaching story, a parable we call it.

The story begins the way many of Jesus' parables begin, "the kingdom is like", and then he goes on to tell the story of a vineyard owner who goes out in the morning in search of workers. He finds some laborers and he tells them that he will pay them a good daily wage to work in his

vineyard and they take him up on the offer and go out into the fields to work.

Then later in the morning, around nine we are told, the man goes out into the streets again and sees more people standing around and so he invites them to also go to work in his fields and he tells them that he will pay them “what is right”.

The man goes out a couple of more times during the day and he offers those standing idle the same deal and they join the others working in the vineyard.

And finally, he goes out once more, around five o’clock, almost the end of the day, and he finds still more people not working and this time, without even discussing payment at all, he invites them to go work in his vineyard and they do, hoping I suppose that the man will surely pay them something for their efforts.

You might notice here that not once does the vineyard owner go back to the fields to see if he even needs more workers. Instead, he goes out into the streets, the marketplace, and sees workers in need of work.

The invitation to come and work in the vineyard seems to be based less on the needs in the fields than it is on the needs of the workers to have good work to do and the sustenance of a daily wage.

And then we get to the heart of the story, the point of the parable. When evening came the owner of the vineyard instructed his manager to call all the workers together at once and, beginning with the last to come to work, to pay them all the same daily wage.

Now he could have paid each worker according to the hours they worked. Or if not, he could have paid the workers who worked the longest first and then sent them on their way. They would not have known how much the other workers received and they would have had no complaints.

The workers who came later and were no doubt expecting to be paid less would have been pleasantly surprised to receive the same as the ones who worked all day, so they certainly would not have complained either. Everyone would have been satisfied.

But this, of course, is a parable and a parable has a point. It is told to communicate a message, to teach us something, and this parable, we must remember, begins with “the kingdom is like...”.

Jesus is trying to teach his followers (us followers if we choose to be such) something about this kingdom of God that he talks about so often and is so central to his mission. And so, Jesus has the man paying the last first and the first last and each of them receiving the same reward at the end of the day.

Doing it this way surprises the expectations of the last to come, those who have come to just accept that they will surely receive less. And, perhaps even more importantly, it challenges the assumptions of the first to come who have come to expect that they surely deserve more.

The kingdom is like..., the parable begins. It is like a generous vineyard owner who, time and time again, goes out into the streets and he finds people there with their hands in their pocketswhen there is so much good work to be done. And in his generosity, he offers them the opportunity of something worth doing to do.

But in this vineyard, this kingdom vineyard, the focus is not so much on the payment we think we will have earned at the end of the day for the vineyard owner will take ample care of all who come. (Remember the lilies of the field.) Perhaps Jesus is trying to tell us that there is also great blessing in the work itself and in working for one so generous as this.

Yes, a whole lot of us Christians spend a whole lot of time, talking a whole lot, about a whole lot of stuff, that Jesus hardly ever talked about at all. Maybe it's high time we start focusing on what Jesus did talk about, pretty much all the time.

"The kingdom of God is at hand" Jesus tells us. The kingdom is still coming, yes, but it is also at hand, here and real right now, if we will just open our eyes enough to see it, open our hearts enough to experience it, open our minds enough to believe in it, open our lives enough to live it, open ourselves enough to embody it.

Maybe Jesus is telling us to stop focusing so much on the reward we will receive at the end of the day and discover the blessing in every day, whenever we finally take our hands out of our pockets and answer the generous invitation to go and work in the vineyard.

And maybe, just maybe, we will find there a different kind of reward, the deeply satisfying knowledge that God has called us to be of good use in this world and that we, in some way perhaps known only to God, have made a difference.