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P R O P E R   1 7

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September 18, 2011  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 20, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary (Track II)

Jeremiah 15:15-21  
Psalm 26:1-8  
Romans 12:9-21  
Matthew 16:21-28

It's really just almost too timely, isn't it?

This parable about unemployment and the struggle to get by—it comes to us in the very week that the Census Bureau has announced a new all-time high in the number of Americans living in poverty. Over 15% of the US population lives below the poverty line, which is defined at a little over \$22,000 per year for a family of four. Looking only at children, the number jumps to 22%. Almost one in every four children in this country lives in a family where there is a daily struggle to pay the rent and put food on the table. We are looking more and more like what experts call an “hourglass society,” divided between the very rich and the very poor, with the middle class steadily eroding away. But today's Gospel reading from Matthew is a reminder that the problems we are facing today are not new ones: the struggle for good work and a good wage has been part of the human story for millennia. Today we hear a story straight out of the hourglass. A rich boss with money to spend however he wants to. And a group of poor day laborers whose families are depending on their ability to get chosen for work.

So many parables seem far removed from contemporary life: people dressed in flowing robes and Bible-times headgear, walking dusty roads to places with names like Jericho. But today's scene is completely familiar. Here in Seattle, at the Home Depot south of downtown, day laborers gather every day to wait for bosses to pull up and pick their work teams. “I need two guys.” “I need four.” “I can offer twelve dollars an hour.” “I can offer ten, take it or leave it.” Here in the city the day labor opportunities are more to do with construction and landscaping than with vineyards, but there are plenty of those east of the Cascades. So it's not hard to imagine this parable taking place in 21st-century Washington. Here's the rich landowner: maybe he's a Seattle executive who got tired of the rat race and decided to live the dream, moved to the Yakima Valley and started his own winery. He seems to be the central figure in the story; maybe he's meant to represent God—though there's always more than one meaning to a parable, so you can never quite be sure. And at harvest time he takes his money, goes into town, and embarks on a decidedly strange sort of personal, privately-financed economic stimulus package.

It's unusual almost from the beginning. After the first crew, it seems as if the boss's motive for hiring additional workers isn't that he actually needs them. He just sees the fact that they're standing idle, and that's what makes him decide to hire them.

What is this idleness like? What does it feel like for these workers to stand there all day, knowing others are working and getting paid? What is it like to realize you're going to return to your family empty-handed after another fruitless day of looking for work? Living on a subsistence wage, not being chosen may well mean the difference between dinner and going to bed hungry. So it's no wonder that even the last shift of laborers accepts the owner's offer without even knowing what he plans to pay them. Something is better than nothing. And anything, perhaps, is better than one more day of standing around, watching others be chosen, feeling your pride and your hope erode from within.

So they work: all of them. Some for a long time, some for short. And at the end, when they each get a full day's pay, it's no wonder the first crew of workers are scandalized. It's not fair!

How often in our lives do we find ourselves saying those three words? It's not fair.

No. It's not fair.

It's grace.

And grace is about something different from fair.

Fair is what happens when you and I are both in competition for a limited set of resources. There's only one Happy Meal toy, and we both want it: we'll have to either fight or take turns. There's only one piece of birthday cake left: Mom had better cut it right down the middle, because if you get more than I do I'm throwing a tantrum. Fair is important: fair is what keeps the peace, whether between grade-school kids at a birthday party or between grown men and women trying to draw up borders in the Middle East. But at its heart, fair is about fear: the fear that I'm going to be left out, that you're going to get a better deal than I am, that there's not going to be enough to go around.

Today's parable gives us a glimpse of a different kind of economy: God's economy, the economy of grace. In God's economy, there is always enough to go around.

Think of Jesus feeding the five thousand on the grass at Galilee, with twelve full baskets brimming with the leftovers. Think of the wedding at Cana, where Jesus changes water into so much wine an entire wedding party couldn't finish it. Think of the heavenly banquet, that image that keeps repeating itself over and over throughout Scripture, where the prophets foretell bread and meat and milk and wine without price and for all comers.

God's economy is about grace: the unexpected showering of favors on those who have done nothing to earn them.

It's God's answer to our human cycle of scarcity, envy, and violence. And it's grounded most deeply in the most profligate act of generosity of all: God giving God's own self away out of love for you and me. In his incarnation, in his whole life of servant love, in his arrest and execution on the cross, in his mysterious victory over death itself, Jesus is the embodiment of self-giving. He doesn't hold onto the glory and privilege of his divine sonship: he makes it a gift to those who deserve it the least. Who is the true worker in God's vineyard, the one who has truly labored from sunrise to sunset? It's Jesus—who has earned the wages for all of us. The reward he has earned is eternal life, glory and joy in God's kingdom—and just like the latecomers to the vineyard, you and I are offered that very same reward. A ticket to the heavenly banquet. The incredible privilege of being adopted as daughters and sons of God.

We might be surprised by who else we meet at that banquet. We might even think they don't deserve it. But in God's economy, the lifelong saint and the lifelong screw-up are both invited—and the only one who doesn't get to come is the poor fool who refuses the invitation.

We're about to rehearse that heavenly banquet here and now. Bread and wine, the living presence of the living Christ. A little morsel, a small sip: the same reward for each of us, no more and no less for any. Yet what we receive, and Who we receive, in that morsel and that sip is infinite, abundant and overflowing.

May that overwhelming love sweep us up into God's unlimited, unimaginable generosity, so that we learn to live that same pattern of overwhelming grace towards others, so that our entire lives become an offering. Amen.

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