

## Not to Be-Labor the Point....

[Text - Matthew 20:1-16]

Pastor Dave Shackle

September 21, 2014

In today's New Testament reading, Jesus tells a story that could make personnel managers and payroll executives pull-out their hair. A landowner hires some laborers to work in his vineyard. Some are hired at six a.m., some at nine, and some at noon. Throughout the day, as the owner returns to the townsquare and sees other people waiting for work, he also hires them, even as late as five p.m.. Then, at 6:00 quitting time, the owner pays each worker a full day's wage - even those who have worked only one hour. Now, according to my inside-source at the *Wall Street Journal*, this is a terrible business practice! Bad enough that it costs this softhearted employer precious money; it also leaves him wide-open to a messy Wage-and-Hour investigation from the Dead Sea Department of Labor. But worst of all, this man's unbridled generosity could make all those other shrewd and sensible "Job Creators" around him, seem uncaring or even a bit greedy!

But why should you and I even care about an ancient tale of vineyards and loose labor practices? Because we know that it's really a story about the here-and-now Realm of God! Jesus tells this story to spotlight two tremendously important topics: the overflowing Grace of God; and the selfish grumbling that the people of God sometimes display. Let's start with the grumbling!

For some reason, the people of God have a long history of begrudging the Grace of God in the lives of others. In Jesus' story, *everyone* receives a full day's wage; yet those who had put in the most hours deeply resent the fact that the owner is so gracious to those "others." They grumble at the owner, saying, "These last, worked only one hour, yet you have made them equal to us...." It seems those wine-producing whiners forget a few important details. First, that the owner has also been good to them - by hiring them and paying them a fair wage. Secondly, it's of absolutely no cost to them that the others be

fully paid. And finally, those grumblers forget that the circumstances could so easily have been reversed: that *they* could have been the ones hired last. And if they *had*, you could bet a full day's wage that they would have *rejoiced* at the wonderful generosity of that gracious owner!

One reason Jesus tells this story, is because of the way that many of the highly religious individuals around him grumble at him for welcoming those people who have *never* been highly religious, and treating those Johnny and Joanie-come lately's with equal dignity and grace. Jesus wants those self-righteous grumblers to know that God loves the tax-collectors, prostitutes, and other publically labeled "sinners" just as much as God loves them! In fact, Jesus says, the Holy One is so delighted to welcome those who have been overlooked or pushed-aside, that those who are considered "least" or "last" by human standards, will be received as "first" and "foremost" within the Divine Realm! And while our natural tendency is to grumble, "That's not fair!" maybe we can better understand this inverted approach if we view it from a different perspective.

In the early 1920's a large European family immigrated to the United States aboard a large ocean liner. Because they'd spent nearly all their money on their tickets, they brought a couple of big sacks of apples, beets, and carrots, so they could have something to eat during their week-long journey. At mealtimes, they'd stay in their cabin and eat their apples, beets, and carrots, while others would enjoy a delicious meal in one of the ship's spacious dining rooms. After a few days of this repetitive diet, they began to crave those wonderful-smelling meals. Finally, on the last day of the voyage, the father asked one of the ship's stewards how much it would cost for them to eat just one good meal in the dinning room. The steward looked a bit puzzled, and then shook his head and smiled. He explained that the price of the meals was included in the fare that they had already paid. All they had to do was come to the table and join the others! How unfortunate that this family would miss-out on all those terrific meals, simply because it wasn't clearly communicated to them that the price had already been paid, and that they were truly welcomed at the

table. Yet think of all the people who miss-out on the opportunities and blessings that come from being actively engaged within God's Family of Faith, simply because they think they're not welcomed or included. And those who have had the Life-long opportunity to *know* that they are a part of God's Family - who have had the privilege and security of working "in the vineyard" - have no reason to grumble. They've *always* had that sense of being accepted and blessed. They've always known that there was a place for them at the table. So one would hope that they would *rejoice* when those who had been left out, finally join-in fully participate, and help lighten the load.

The Good News that Jesus proclaims, is that Divine Love and Grace is extended to *all* people; that *all* are called to live and work within God's Holy Realm, and to joyfully share together in fruit of our labor. And our primary labor, as a Family of Faith, is to clearly communicate and ensure that everyone be included - especially those "others" who are often passed-over, put-down, and left-out. Unfortunately, there are many people who have only heard this message from the Church: "You are **not** welcome; you need to look and think and act more like *us*, in order to ever be accepted." As a gay man, I myself have clearly heard that message. Yet this is not the message, or the example, of Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals a gracious Heavenly Parent who invites *all God's Children* to come and participate and feel completely at home.

This brings us to the second thing that Jesus highlight in his story: The *abundance* of Divine grace and generosity. The landowner does two things that display remarkable generosity. The first, is to hire *all* the people who need work; and the second, is to pay them all a full day's wage. In Jesus day, if you needed a job, or if you needed workers, you would go to the agora [or town square] early in the morning, which is what this landowner does. Yet he also returns throughout the day, and hires more workers. It's not necessarily because he needs the workers, but because the workers need the job! He even hires those who have been passed-over by all the other employers - probably not the cream of the crop! Yet when he sees them still waiting, he graciously brings them on board.

This gives us a glimpse of what God does for you and me. The Holy One invites us all to participate in the work of cultivating, enhancing, and *manifesting* the Divine Realm. And we're invited to do this, not because we've proven ourselves to be such great and dedicated workers; but because of God's great and dedicated love for us all. Our Divine Source truly desires that we live our lives fully, freely and joyfully! And a large part of our life's meaning and joy comes from being able to do things that are productive and worthwhile. This is one reason that our Church's call to social justice, includes advocating for gainful employment and fair wages for all people. The vineyard's owner not only provides the work, but also pays each person a full day's wage, regardless of the number of hours they labored. This causes some of the workers to protest that the owner isn't fair! And it may lead some of us to think that perhaps *God* isn't completely fair. Personally, I hope that God is not *completely* fair - because if God gives us exactly what we deserve, then I'm in a lot of trouble!

Jesus Christ reveals a God who is *more* than fair - One who is willing to give each person what he or she needs, rather than what he or she might actually deserve. And that's what Divine *Grace* is all about: the Holy One generously provides Life's blessings to us, not because we've earned them, but because our Divine Source has genuine compassion for us all. And when you and I truly believe this, it will definitely make a positive difference in how we live our lives.

It helps us move beyond our petty grumbling, and inspires us to give thanks for all those who join us on the journey.

It compels us to work for that Divine Desire: that each person on earth be afforded Life's basic necessities and blessings. It helps us realize that we don't have to push-aside others to make room for ourselves - God's Table has ample room for us all!

Trusting in the gracious abundance of Divine Love in our own lives, will inspire us to share that same kind of Divine Love with those around us. And then, by the Power and Grace of God, we can joyfully labor together on our primary task: to make sure that all people are

welcome, included, and feel completely at home within this fantastic Family of Faith!