

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.

Matthew 20:1-16

Where 2 or 3 are gathered together - in families, friends, or church - the challenge is always: How will we deal with envy when God is generous with some but not all.

Listed on The Text This Week, www.textweek.com: Contemporary Commentary, Studies, and Exegesis for the Gospel reading.

Year A

Pentecost 14

September 18, 2011

Sunday Between September 18 and September 24 Inclusive

Proper 20, Ordinary Time 25

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 20:1-16, The Message](#) or [Matthew 20:1-16, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click here, [Matthew 20:1-16](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "."

This text is another parable on the [Kingdom of Heaven](#).

As is often the case, the parable focuses on the survival concerns under the reign of the present ruler of those who are the poorest and most vulnerable: food, daily wages, protection, etc.

As is the case today, daily labourers were among the poorest. The denarius, the usual daily wage, was just enough to buy food for that day. No work that day meant no food that day.

As the landowner engages each group of labourers, he makes the standard agreement with each of them. But at the end of the day, the early groups are surprised - and envious - that he has made the **SAME** agreement with everyone, even those who only began working at the end of the day.

The repeated visits to the marketplace by the landowner to look for labourers is a warning to anticipate some other unexpected behaviour from him. (What sort of landlord makes so many trips? What doesn't he just hire everyone he needs in one trip?)

It is fairly easy to turn this parable into a simple sermon about how old timers and new comers are treated the same in God's economy.

Perhaps it might be deepened by also reflecting on how envy destroys community.

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The question:

Are you envious because I am generous?

is the one for the community to reflect on.

Bruce Malina offers some helpful information on beliefs regarding the evil eye. (The underlying actual Greek for the above question is often only in a footnote: "Is your eye evil because I am good.")

First, in Jesus' day, it was understood that light comes OUT of the eyes. That is, we are able to see NOT because of light coming into our eyes, but because of the light that comes out of our eyes. It is what is inside us - what is in our hearts - that enables us to see. We see by sending out what is inside us. Blindness was understood to be a heart problem.

The evil eye is literally inner evil that is projected outwards through the eyes. It was especially believed that envy - the covetous glance - was an outward projecting of evil desiring. And evil desiring always resulted in evil acquiring - taking what belonged to others. A great deal of alertness: charms, chants, and gestures were required to avoid being "hit" by an evil eye.

Interestingly, modern brain research has discovered that in fact our brains ARE impacted by the looks on other people's faces. For example, when someone looks angrily at us, our brains will pick that up, and set off an "anger" response in our bodies 100 to 1,000 times faster than our conscious brain is able to register what is happening.

Where 2 or 3 are gathered together - in families, friends, or church - the challenge is always: How will we deal with envy when God is generous with some but not all.

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Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 100-102, 357-359.

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

Matthew 20:1-16 (NRSV)

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, 'You

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also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went.⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?'⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.'⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.'⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.'¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?'¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

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Matthew 20:1-16 (The Message)

¹ "God's kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ² They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work.

³ "Later, about nine o'clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. ⁴ He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. ⁵ They went.

"He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. ⁶ At five o'clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, 'Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?

⁷ ' "They said, 'Because no one hired us.'

"He told them to go to work in his vineyard.

⁸ "When the day's work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, 'Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.'

⁹ "Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given a dollar. ¹⁰ When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. ¹¹ Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, ¹² 'These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.'

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¹³ "He replied to the one speaking for the rest, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? ¹⁴ So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. ¹⁵ Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?'

¹⁶ "Here it is again, the Great Reversal: many of the first ending up last, and the last first."

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