

Generous to a Fault?

[Text - Matthew 20:1-16]

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For some reason, the people of God have a long history of begrudging the *Grace* of God in the lives of others. In this morning's parable, Jesus says that *everyone* receives a full day's wage; yet those who put-in the most hours deeply resent the owner's generosity toward those "others." They grumble at the vineyard owner, saying, "These last, worked only one hour, yet you have made them equal to us...." Apparently 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 easily have been reversed: that *they* could have been the last to arrive. And if they *had* been, you could wager - a full day's wages - that they would have *rejoiced* at the wonderful generosity of that owner! [They're kind of like the descendants of immigrants whining about the arrival of *new* immigrants, into *their* country.]

Jesus is telling this parable in response to the way that many of the highly religious people around him *grumble* at him for welcoming people who are *not* highly religious; and for treating these Joanie and Johnny-come-lately's with dignity and respect, generosity and grace. Jesus wants these self-righteous grumblers to know that the Holy One loves 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 over-looked or pushed-aside, that those who are considered "least" or "last" by human standards, will be received as "first" and "foremost" in the Divine Realm! And while our natural tendency is to grumble, "That's not fair!" perhaps we

can better understand this inverted approach if we view it from this perspective:

People who've had the security of "working in the vineyard" - or the privilege of serving within the Divine Realm - have no reason to grumble. They've *always* been accepted and blessed. They've always known that there's a place for them at the Table. On the other hand, the people who've missed-out on the opportunities and blessings that come from being actively engaged, haven't had that security - often because they've been convinced that they are not worthy or welcome! Yet one would think that those who've been part of the process all-along would *rejoice* when those who have 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 the Divine Realm - to joyfully share together in fruits of our labor. And our primary labor, as a Family of Faith, is to passionately advocate for *everyone* to be included - especially those "others" who are often passed-over, put-down, and left-out. Unfortunately, the loudest message that many people hear from the Church is "You are **not** welcome; you need to think and look and act more like *us*, before you'll even be considered, let alone be accepted!" Yet this is not the message, or the example, of Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals a gracious Divine Source who invites *all* people to come and participate; to feel completely welcome and at home.

This brings us to another point that Jesus raises with this parable, which is the *abundance* of Divine Grace and Generosity. The vineyard owner does two things that display this tremendous 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. Back in Jesus day, if you needed a job, or if you needed workers, you'd go to the center of town early in the morning - which is what this owner

does. Yet he also returns throughout the day, and keeps hiring more workers. It's not necessarily because he needs the workers, but because those workers need the job! He even hires people who've 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 the Holy One does for each one of us. The Holy One invites us *all* to participate in the work of cultivating - and manifesting - the Divine Realm. And we're invited to do this, not because we've proven ourselves to be great or deeply dedicated workers; but because of the Holy One's great and deeply dedicated love for us all. Our Divine Source desires that we all live our lives fully, freely and joyfully! And a big part of Life's meaning and joy comes from being able to do things that are worthwhile, productive, and life-sustaining. So 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 worked. 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 fair. Personally, I hope that God is not *completely* fair - because if God were to give us exactly what we deserve, then I am 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 genuinely *loves us all*! And when you and I truly trust this, it will make a positive difference in how we treat one another.

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

It motivates us to work for a Divine Desire: that each person on earth be afforded Life's basic necessities and blessings.

And perhaps most importantly, helps us realize that we don't have to push-aside others to make room for ourselves - because at the Divine Table of Grace, there is plenty of room for every one of us!