

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
Septuagesima Sunday¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of Joshua.³

“Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ minister, saying, Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I swear unto their fathers to give them. Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the twentieth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the market-place, and said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

⁵ St. Matthew 20:1-16 (KJV).

⁶ St. Matthew 20:15-16 (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 20:1 (KJV).

⁸ St. Matthew 20:4 (KJV).

⁹ St. Matthew 20:13-15 (KJV).

¹⁰ St. Matthew 20:15 (KJV).

¹¹ St. Matthew 20:15 (KJV).

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then asked the question that condemned those who questioned him: *“Is thine eye evil, because I am good?”*¹¹

Do you see evil in me because I do good to others? Is your sense of self-importance and self-worth so greatly inflated that you impugn evil when I do good to another? What becomes then of humility, of charity and of kindness?

What a blessing indeed that it is not our sense of justice that prevails in heaven, but God’s. What a mercy that God so often gives us not what we have earned or deserved, but what we need, as the owner of the vineyard gave some workers not the hour’s wage they had earned but the day’s wage they needed to feed themselves and their families.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we thank thee that Thy mercy is not as human mercy, but is that sense of mercy as comes from Him who sees all, knows all, considers all. Remind us always, as St. Paul tells Your church at Corinth, that we should run that we obtain, and that we strive not for worldly things, subject to worldly corruption, but for those incorruptible things which can come only from You. This we ask of your incomparable mercy. *Amen.*

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on Septuagesima Sunday, 2013.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Joshua 1: 1-9 (KJV).

⁴ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

Text:

From the Second Lesson: *“Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”*⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

What a blessing that it is not our sense of justice that prevails in heaven, but God’s.

It is a natural thing for us to feel sympathy for the workers in the parable Jesus tells. Some had worked all day in the hot sun picking and working in the vineyard. Others worked only a short time, and yet they received the same wages as did those who worked and sweated all day.

The situation somehow offends our sense of fairness, and of propriety. We intuitively feel that those who worked longer hours, who spent their whole day working rather than only a short time, somehow deserve more.

We jump then to the conclusion that the man who owned the vineyard and paid the workers was wrong for paying them all the same amount. Our modern notions of equality, based as they are on the fungibility of every man and woman and expressed as they are in civil service classifications of “fairness” and labor union work rules about “seniority”, lead us to feel that he should take into account how long each worked when calculating what they may have earned.

God, however, does not work to rule. God is not worried about being perceived as arbitrary, or about being accused of being discriminatory, or about being criticized because He does not guarantee equality of outcomes. So Jesus turns on its head our earthly, human sense of “fairness” and reminds us that

we, as servants of God, must trust God to do as He wills. We must spend our concern ensuring not that we dictate what God should do, but rather that we do what God wills.

*“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder,”*⁷ He begins. This householder hired on some workers early in the morning, then more in a few hours, and still more in later hours of the day, each time assuring them, *“Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you.”*⁸

That is the clue to what was going on here: it all turns on **how** one defines what is “right”, and **who** it is who gets to define what is right. The householder in this parable is, of course, God. The work that He was assigning in the vineyard was the passing down of the Gospel from age to age into the world, which is the vineyard itself. With each of these workers, the homeowner promised what is “right” and what turned out to be “right” was a penny. But that was not what you or I know as a penny, one of those silly little zinc coins, washed with a thin coating of copper, that can buy precisely nothing.

Those who heard Jesus’ words would have easily enough understood the tale and the wages involved. A penny for a day of work was a normal wage in the time. The penny was the Roman silver coin that was commonly used as a day’s wages. Thus the story would have prompted in Jesus’ hearers the very same sense of injustice that we may feel on hearing this story. But our Lord leads the hearers through to find a very different conclusion than we may have come to at first.

All the day long, Jesus says, the homeowner went out every few hours to bring in more workers to toil in his vineyard. Even up to the eleventh hour, he still sent more workers into his vineyard to labor. Finally, when the day was done, it was time for the laborers to be paid, and to each worker the homeowner gave the very same “penny”—that is, silver *denarius*—of wage. This equality of wage outraged the men who had been laboring all day, who proceeded to grumble about their pay, complaining

that it was not fair that those who came to the vineyard late and worked but a short time would receive the same wage as those who had labored all day in the hot sun.

But the homeowner brought them up short: *“But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?”*⁹

In one fell swoop he undercut their entire complaint. First, the laborers had each, individually agreed to the wage that he, in fact, received. Their agreement was not some group activity, nor was it subject to vague general senses of fairness, but was rather a personal agreement between each worker and the owner for a day’s labor. God, of course, relates to each of us individually within our hearts and souls.

Too, the vineyard owner pointed out that he can do what he liked with his own. So it also is with grace. God can do as He pleases. We know through the Gospels and the grace of our Baptisms that God wishes for each of us to labor with and for Him all of our days, and He promises us the reward of heaven.

But if we labor faithfully throughout a long life, we earn no more than does that Christian who lives only a brief time, or who comes to Christianity late in life, and in either case therefore labors less in some quantitative sense than we did. In the final accounting, the reward is the same.

*“Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own,”*¹⁰ responded the vineyard owner to the protestations of the workers who somehow felt slighted.

While he owed no explanation to anyone, he pointed out that he might do as he pleased with that which was his own. So, too, may God do as He pleases with His own. The land owner