

Year A 25<sup>th</sup> Sun OT

Matthew 20:1-16

### **That Parable Again**

Each year we hear this parable. Each year we find it irritating. Each year we amusedly listen to the preacher trying to square the circle; that is, to make an unfair situation sound fair. Imagine giving someone who works only one hour the same pay as someone who worked twelve hours! It doesn't wash. But if you take the parable out of our modern context and put it in the biblical context—that is, in context with all the other crazy parables that have the same incredible message that slaps us in the face with delightful surprise—it's not as nonsensical as it sounds. Let me review four of the parables that are precise variations on our gospel, and you'll begin to see the point.

First, there is the parable of **the unforgiving servant**, with its message of God's extraordinary capacity to forgive someone with a huge debt he couldn't possibly pay back. Then there are the familiar stories of **the lost sheep, the woman with the lost coin, and the prodigal son**. You know them well. In each of these stories, we see how almighty God acts toward us in a way that we would not naturally expect. They all reveal a God who comes to us in love and mercy, not as a harsh judge who justifiably wants to punish us for our sins.

These five parables show God's radical and surprising ways with us. No first-century king, for example, would forgive a huge debt any more than Visa or MasterCard would cancel thousands of dollars of credit card debt.

No sensible shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep at huge risk to go looking for one measly lost animal.

No sane woman would sweep her house for hours looking for a single lost coin worth ten cents.

And certainly no first-century father would freely forgive his wayward son, running to meet him and then throwing a party to celebrate his return. A proper father would put the son on probation for a while to see if he was serious about repenting.

Likewise in today's parable, the workers who had toiled all day in the

oppressive heat felt they had been cheated when they discovered that those who started work only an hour before quitting time received the same pay as they did. But, you see, the same dynamic is at work here as is in the other parables: the late-hour workers are the indebted servant, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son. They are all the same character.

In all these stories Jesus is claiming that each of us is of infinite worth to almighty God, no matter who we are or what we have done or not done, how long we have or haven't worked. All fringe, indebted, lost, latecomer folk are given undeserved kindness and mercy.

Do you see the point? This is not a parable about fairness or labor-management relations. It's a story about God, a God who leaves ninety-nine to search for one, who sweeps a house for ten cents, who embraces a son who had fled him—and who gives one-hour laborers too much money. It's a story designed to take our breath away and ask, "What kind of a God is this who subverts all human expectations?"

One of my favorite plays is *Les Misérables*, which ran on Broadway for eighteen years. It's a great story, with fabulous music as many of you know. Based on the novel by Victor Hugo, the central character in the story is Jean Valjean, who has been released after nineteen years in prison, a bitter man. He had been sentenced to jail for stealing a loaf of bread to feed the children in his family.

Freed at last, Valjean is denied food and lodging in a village, even though he has some money because no one wants an ex-convict around. Finally a kindly bishop invites him home, offering him a meal and a bed. The bishop insists on putting his finest silver plates on the table used only for special guests when Valjean dines with him.

During the night Valjean wakes up, steals the bishop's silver plates, and sneaks out of the house. The police soon catch him. He lies about the silver plates, saying that the bishop gave them to him as a gift. The police take Valjean back to the bishop's house with the stolen goods. When Valjean returns to the bishop's house in police custody, the bishop exclaims that he is glad to see him because he also wanted to give him the silver candlesticks as well. The gendarmes have no

choice but to let him go.

This amazing act of forgiveness and mercy makes such a deep impression on Jean Valjean that he is transformed into a new person who spends the rest of his life serving others and showing mercy to them.

Think: the bishop is the forgiving master of the indebted servant, the farmer pursuing the lost sheep, the house sweeper searching for a lousy dime, the father embracing his hippie son. He acts irrationally. Who puts out silverware for a bum? Who pretends that he gave away his silver to the same bum and is glad he's back to claim the candlesticks as well?

Don't you see? The bishop is God; he is the master in today's gospel who acts generously to people who did not earn or deserve his generosity. Now do you catch the point of the parable?

God acts in your life and in mine in this same way. God, thank heavens, shows us grace and mercy when we least deserve it, and like Jean Valjean, we are transformed when we truly experience such gracious love. We are freed to serve others, diligently doing good works with no need to keep score any more.

If you want a summary of this gospel, here it is: there were cries from the lost servant, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and the lost workers.

This parable says that, unbelievably, their cries were heard by God, who lost both his mind and his heart, went out, and found them.