

GETTING TO WORK

Sermon, September 24, 2017

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

I'd like to re-read verse 15 from our Gospel selection this morning: "*Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?*" Are you envious? Harold Coffin has this to say about envy – "*Envy is the art of counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own.*"

There is an old Jewish parable about envy, of a poor Polish farmer who is visited by the angel of the Lord (I'll give the shortened version). The Angel visits the farmer and says to him, "*You have found favor in the eyes of your Maker. He wants to bless you. Therefore, make any three requests of God, and he will be pleased to give them to you. There is only one condition: your neighbor will get a double portion of everything that is given to you.*"

So, after consulting his wife, the poor farmer prayed. "*Oh, blessed God, if I could just have a herd of a thousand cattle; that would enable my family to break out of the poverty i we've lived in for generations. That would be so wonderful.*" No sooner had he prayed than he and his wife heard the sound of animal noises outside. Lo and behold, all around the house were a thousand magnificent cattle! He was ecstatic, until he went up on a hill, looked across at his neighbor's field, and there standing on the green hillside were TWO thousand cattle. The joy within him evaporated and a scowl of envy took its place. He went home in a foul mood, refused to eat supper, and couldn't fall asleep that night because all he could think about were his neighbor's two thousand cattle. After being consoled and counseled by his wife, he remembered he had two more wishes, so he prayed a second time: "*Gracious God, please give us a child that we may have descendants.*" Sure enough, shortly thereafter, his wife was expecting their first child. But not long after that, he learned his neighbor's wife was expecting twins!

In an envious fit of pique, he then made his third request: "*Lord, please make me blind ... in one eye.*"

In the words of that "great theologian" ... Oliver Stone: "*Never underestimate the power of envy to destroy.*"

In Jesus' parable, we read about some envious laborers. He tells of a vineyard owner who went into the marketplace early in the morning to hire laborers. There were twelve "hours" in the working day, dawn to sundown ... the first hour is approximately 6 a.m., the third hour (v. 3) would be around 9:00 A.M., the sixth about noon, and the eleventh hour, about 5:00 P.M, and the twelfth hour, quitting time, 6:00 P.M. The landowner finds his first set of workers at 6 A.M. and agrees to pay each one a denarius. Now, what we need to appreciate is that a denarius was a *very* fair wage for a day's unskilled labor. In fact, it was a very *generous* wage. A denarius was a standard day's pay for a *skilled* employee; in fact, it was the standard pay at the time for a Roman soldier. The typical pay for an unskilled laborer would normally be MUCH less. So, it was a generous blessing to be offered this kind of pay for unskilled labor. The vineyard owner hires the first batch at 6 am, three hours later he saw he was going to need more workers, so he returned and hired more laborers, promising to pay "whatever is right." About noon, the sixth hour, he again found it necessary to hire more workers, then again at the ninth hour, three o'clock, then even again at the eleventh hour, five o'clock. Again, quitting time was six o'clock, so these last hires only had to labor one hour. At six o'clock he had his foreman line up the laborers to be paid. He began with those hired last who had worked only an hour. He paid them a whole denarius! Those who had been at work since six that morning saw this, and were probably thinking. "*Wow. If he pays them a denarius for working just one hour, think how much he will pay us!*"

However, when the ones who worked all day also received the denarius, they were not happy. They had worked all day and they were receiving the same amount as those who had worked just one hour? "That's not fair," they grumbled. The landowner insists he is not cheating anyone. He has paid the agreed wage, and it was in fact a very generous wage. Doesn't he have the right to do what he wants with his money? Now, I'll be honest ... on one hand I've always sort of sympathized with these grumblers; I can understand this on a human level. But on the other hand, "*Envy is the art of counting the other fellow's blessings instead of your own.*" Grumbling ALWAYS happens when we give way to envy, rather than realizing and appreciating the good gifts we have been generously given. And besides, envy has a way of only looking at one side of the story ... usually our side ... and doesn't always appreciate and/or care to understand the motivation(s) of the "unfair" Blesser.

Let me encourage the all-day workers to look at this from another perspective; let's look at this in another way. The ones who started work in the morning knew early on that they had a generous wage coming. All day long they were working, all day long they had something productive to do, all day long they got to go to work in the vineyard, all day long they knew they would have money to buy bread for their families and/or pay off some debts when they came home that night. No matter what happened during the course of the "day," they had something productive to do, they had work, and they had real and substantial hope of reward in the end ... all the day long. The others, however, weren't so fortunate. They had hours to worry about what would happen to them. They had hours waiting around spent in direction-less, non-productive in-activity. Hours where their talents and strengths are

rusting in idleness because there was nothing for them to do. Hours of quiet desperation, wondering if they would have anything at the end of the day to provide for their families or pay off some debt, hours to wonder about their self-worth, and so on and on. They also had hours in which they may be tempted to engage energy in useless and even self-destructive things because they had nothing else to do. There are few things worse than idleness. In idleness, worries fester and metastasize. In idleness, temptation often grows stronger and more enticing, and in idleness, self-esteem often plummets. These men *wanted* to work; the fact that some of them stood around in the marketplace with ever-dimming hope until five o'clock in the evening is proof of how desperately they wanted work. In the words of Albert Camus: "*Without meaningful work, all life goes rotten ... without meaningful work life stifles and dies.*"

A story is told about Beverly Sills, the great operatic soprano whose peak career was between the fifties and the seventies. She had a matinee performance one Sunday afternoon at the Metropolitan Opera. Afterwards she was signing autographs for a long line of fans. One couple waited patiently in line, and noticed on the back of the playbill that Beverly Sills was slated to sing at the 7:00 PM performance that same evening. When they got to her, they asked for her autograph, and she graciously engaged them in conversation, seemingly oblivious to the clock. The man said, "*Miss Sills, it is a wonderful privilege to speak with you in person, and we are very grateful to you for allowing us to do so, but we don't want to take up anymore of your time. After all, you have to sing tonight.*" To which Beverly Sills replied, "*I don't have to sing tonight.*" A bit baffled, the man said, "*But here on the back of the program, it says 'Beverly Sills: 7:00 P.M.'* You do have to sing tonight." Ms. Sills: "*I DON'T have to sing tonight.*" Man: "*But ... is there a misprint?*"

With a twinkle in her eye, Beverly Sills replied, "*No, you don't understand. I don't have to sing tonight. I GET to sing tonight. Do you know what a privilege it is to sing at the Metropolitan Opera? I don't HAVE to do it. I GET to do it!"*

What a wonderful attitude! Apply that across the board. "*No, I don't have to go to work, I get to go to work.*" "*I don't have to take care of my children. I GET to take care of my children.*" "*I don't have to preach every Sunday. I GET to preach (but you have to listen!)" "*I don't have to take care of my ailing spouse, I GET to take care of him/her. I don't have to provide for my dependent parents, I GET to provide for them and repay some of the huge debt I owe them!" And so on. We GET to do these things. It's a privilege! And We GET to work in the vineyard of God. Think of the vineyard in the parable being the Kingdom of God, and think of the "day" in this parable as the course of a lifetime. The earlier we get to go to work in the vineyard in the life of our "day" on earth, the better off we are! The sooner we learn to love and serve God, the better off we will be! We won't have the days, the months, the years desperately wondering what's it all about, wondering what we are supposed to do, wandering into all sorts of difficulty because we have no divine purpose, wondering if there will be anything at all, any point to it all, in the end. The luckiest ones are those who begin their "work" in the vineyard when they are very young; they are "called to work" early in the morning, their tender years are seasoned with grace and the remembrance of their Creator, and they grow up knowing who they are, what they are called to do, knowing how to be more productive and useful and fulfilled, and all the while knowing there is a wonderful reward coming at the end of the "day!" We are happy to welcome older young people and young adults and even older adults who come to work later in the "day" (*or, in many cases, who come BACK to work*); if anything, they are the ones who grow to envy those who got to go to work early in the "morning" of their lives ... but that's another sermon.**

On a somewhat related note, and I only have a little time left to address this, but a question often raised by this story is this: Can a person live a life of sin and decadence right up until the 11th hour of life and then on his deathbed repent, confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and receive the "denarius", the generous payment of life eternal, as if he or she had been a life-long saint? Well, yes. That's the biblical teaching. If that's true, then why not go ahead and live a life of decadence and wait until the last moment to slip into the kingdom and get the eternal "denarius?"

There are lots of ways that question can be addressed, but what really troubles me about that question is that it is even asked by serious Christians in the first place! I mean, don't we believe living the life of faith is the best way to live? Don't we believe Jesus meant it when He said He came that we might have life that is full and abundant? Why would we envy such a person who missed out on a lifetime of blessedness? Do we really think that living life without a sense of destiny and purpose and calling, living life without any real and substantial hope, is preferable, more enjoyable, more pleasurable than the life of faith? **God is good!** And His ways are good! They are good for us and they are good for everyone. The divine blueprint for life is sound, and it really is the best possible way to get the fullest enjoyment out of life. There is a very real sense in which virtue is its own reward. Sin may bring pleasure, but it never brings happiness and deep contentment ... the "pleasure" is fleeting and the consequences are disproportionately destructive and often life-long in comparison to the momentary "pleasure." We don't "get away" with anything; sin always exacts a toll on you and on those whose lives you touch. Let me ask a question: What would you change about your life if you knew there was no heaven or hell? Personally, I wouldn't change a thing. Fear of judgement may have brought you to God, but it shouldn't keep you there! I don't **envy** the scoundrel who makes a "death-bed confession." I **pity** him for missing out on the best life has to offer, I feel sorry for him that it has taken him this long to realize how good and gracious and generous God really is.

To paraphrase the Westminster Shorter Catechism: We GET to glorify God and enjoy Him forever ... and the sooner we learn that, the better our "day" will be.