

Proper 20, Pentecost XIX September 21, 2008

Life is preparation for heaven, for the kingdom of God. Now this can be tricky. Life is not preparation for heaven the way one grade in school is a preparation for the next grade, or like taking the Bar exam is preparation for a license to practice law. That is, the point isn't that you have to jump through a bunch of hoops, or take a really hard test, and then if you pass, you get to go to the next level, or to the good place.

Instead, your life is preparation for the kingdom of God the way your life as a child is preparation for your life as an adult. It's preparation the way your child's watching your marriage is preparation for the sort of husband or wife your child will be. It's preparation the way how you live is preparation for how you will die. It's preparation as practice, as formation. It's about learning that language of love that I talked about a couple of weeks ago, the language we will spend eternity hearing.

Nowhere is that clearer than in that infuriating parable of the laborers in the vineyard. You all know the story. Folks are hired for a fair day's wages, and some work all day (like we do). Others begin working at various times during the day. A few of these worked only an hour or two. The owner pays everybody exactly the same amount—both those who worked all day, and those who worked only an hour. The ones who worked all day were unhappy, they grumbled; they were convinced there was something unfair going on.

How about it? Does something about this story bother you? Would you like a new employee at your job to show up on the 27th and get the same monthly check you get? Even if you thought *your* pay was fair? It's troubling. There's just something *wrong* here somewhere, and we can feel it.

At the same time, it is difficult to point out just exactly what it is that's wrong. The parable takes that on quite directly; and in fact it's nearly impossible to spell out exactly why the situation is not fair to the workers who complained.

Try it. If you worked all day, and I worked an hour, then why is paying me as much as you contracted to get unfair to *you*? To me maybe; but why to you? Still, it really rubs the wrong way.

Be that as it may, I suspect that the most important thing here is not to understand why we feel that story is unfair. What's at stake in this parable is much too important for that. The most important thing here isn't to understand. The most important thing here is to repent. There is real judgment in this parable.

You see, at the moment those laborers were being paid, they were, all of them, regardless of when they arrived, living in the kingdom of God. All of them had received from the master's hand. God gave each of them all that there was to give. That's a pretty good picture of the kingdom.

But some of them, the good ones, the ones *we* sympathize with, the ones we are most like, the ones we understand and try to justify, these were *miserable*. They were living in the kingdom of God, and *they hated it*. There was a party going on all around them, they were surrounded by joyful, thankful, blessed people. They were honored guests at the party, and they were miserable.

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Perhaps another way into this whole thing, and one that I rather like, is a somewhat tongue-in-cheek saying by John Scotus Eriugena. Scotus was a 9th century theologian who was born in Ireland and traveled and wrote widely in his day; but whose work was lost for almost 1,000 years. One day, (I suspect he said it in part for the fun of it and in part sincerely), anyway, one day Scotus proclaimed loudly and articulately that there was no hell.

Hell was just a metaphor. Everybody, Scotus said, went to heaven. Everybody. Sinners went to heaven—even the worst sinners went straight to heaven. But when they got there, when they got to heaven (wait for it) when sinners got to heaven, they hated it—it was awful for them; they were miserable. That, Scotus said, is how God’s justice works. Even sinners went to heaven; but they found it a terrible place to be. And the more I think about this, the better I like it. Scotus was really on to something here—I suspect the same thing Jesus was getting at in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

Now, both Jesus’ parable and Scotus’ insight are, I suspect, huge hints about what the kingdom of God is like; and because of this, they should be absolutely terrifying to us. Remember, it’s the laborers who worked all day that are the folks we usually relate to. And there they were, smack dab in the middle of the Kingdom of God, and there was not a flake of joy among them.

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It’s sort of a joke, really. Look at those fools, the hardest working laborers—here they are, invited guests to creation’s greatest banquet. They have it all; and they can’t enjoy a single minute of it.

It's funny if you get the joke, if you see the humor, the plain silliness, of these hard working, self-righteous, small-spirited folks doing their very best to be unhappy in the midst of God's abundant mercy.

But if you don't get the joke, then it isn't funny—it's tragic and it's scary. If you don't get the joke, then think about this. The folks who were unhappy, and who could well choose to be miserable throughout all eternity; those were the folks who paid special attention to themselves, to what they did and to what they deserved, and to how they could be offended.

The folks who *were* happy, and for whom life in the kingdom was a joy, these were the folks who focused their attention on God and on God's mercy.

In this parable, God is both inviting us into his kingdom, and showing us what life in that kingdom is like. The idea is that we can practice this life a bit here and now, so we'll be more comfortable when we get there.

Indeed, those laborers who worked all day are not only fools; in fact, to be theologically precise, they are damned fools. They are also comic characters. But we need to be able to see all of that. After all, what's important is not when we started to work; and what's important is not whatever work it was that we did; instead, what's important is that we are invited, and that, if we simply choose to let go of ourselves, we, too, can join the party.

Life, after all, is preparation for heaven, for the kingdom of God.