

You're Hired

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service September 18, 2011, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16.*

Early one morning this week I headed over to the park to run in this gorgeous weather. As soon as I hit the sidewalk outside my building, I faced a stampede of young children and their determined parents, converging from every direction, rushing to get to school on time. Their sheer numbers, their speed, their determination tinged with ruthlessness—it was a little frightening. Two toddlers blew past me, running happily toward the corner, pursued by their mother or nanny, herself running as she wheeled an infant in a carriage. The look in her eyes told me *not* to get in her way. Today is back-to-Sunday-School time here at St. Bart's. No stampedes (so far).

Seeing all those children and their parents, seeing their brand new book bags, seeing the spectrum of emotions on all their faces—delight, excitement, nervousness, fear—caused me to remember how it felt to start school every fall. Do you remember? Are you helping your child through it now? Remember starting a whole new year, with new books, new teachers, some new fellow students, new expectations? What will my teachers expect of me? What do I expect of them? What do my parents expect of me, and what do I expect of them? What do I expect of myself? How will I do compared with others this year? Will I be smarter or dumber? Will I run faster or slower? These questions don't stop with childhood. We continue to ask them, in some form, all our lives.

Whatever household we grow up in, we learn the rules of that household. Then, and for the rest of our lives, we learn the rules of whatever communities we live and work in. What we learn about the rules builds our sense of and expectations for fairness.

Who doesn't remember saying as a child: "That's not FAIR!" He got a bigger piece of cake than I did. She got twelve Christmas presents and I only got nine. You let him stay out later than me. She got to go on three trips this summer and I didn't.

Who doesn't remember saying (or thinking) as an adult: "That's not FAIR!" I did all the work, but he got the promotion. I held up my end of the bargain; you're not holding up yours.

That's what Jonah's saying. At this point in the story (and it's a great story—I encourage you to read the whole thing) Jonah is mad at God, pouting because God is going to show mercy when the Ninevites clearly don't deserve it. Jonah is also mad that he's going to look like a fool when God doesn't destroy the Ninevites like Jonah prophesied. Note that Jonah is focused on himself and how he appears in relation to others, and he's making himself miserable.

It's the same with those first-hired day laborers in Matthew's parable as they collect their pay at the end of a long hot day in the vineyard. They were hired first for the usual daily wage. Others were hired after them, at noon, at three, at five o'clock. Interesting that those hired first had no complaints when they were the first ones chosen. They had the promise of a full day's work and enough money to feed their family when they got home that night. The ones hired later had waited all day, also in the hot sun, and were glad to get any work at all so they wouldn't go home to their families empty-handed.

You know these day laborers. You may have seen them here in Manhattan over on Second Avenue. At Home Depot in Hempstead on Long Island. Under the #7 line on Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights. At Port Richmond and Castleton on Staten Island. Along Bay Parkway in Brooklyn. Near highway on-ramps in Westchester County. Every city has a place where men gather to wait to be hired for the day. They wait, especially now in this recession, for work that, more often than not, never comes. This is not living paycheck to paycheck; this is day to day. No work, no food. No safety net.

This parable makes me very uncomfortable, because it makes me think of these things:

- This week's Census Bureau report that 46.2 million Americans live below the poverty line. That's 15-16% of this country's total population, our highest percentage since 1993.
- Of those, 2.6 million fell into poverty last year.
- Actually, three quarters of working-age adults below the poverty line do work, some several jobs. Their jobs just don't pay enough to live on.

- Here in this country, even in the year 2011, women make on average only 78% of what men make for the same work. Even less when you do the numbers by race.
- I think of people I know, good and talented people, who deeply want and need to work, and have been trying for months or years to find work, any work.
- I think of people I know, good and talented people, who don't need to work at all—ever. Some of them are using their wealth to change unfair systems.
- I wonder how is it that some of us have too much work (12-18 hours a day, 60-80 hours a week) when others have no work at all?

And all this is only in this country, where collectively we enjoy a standard of living that's in a whole different stratosphere than most of the world.

Parables are deceptively simple stories designed to pull us out of our comfort zones. This one's working for me. Matthew's community and Jesus' community would have been uncomfortable with it, too.

New Testament scholar Bill Herzog has called Jesus' parables "Subversive Speech." [*Parables as Subversive Speech*, William R. Herzog II, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994] From my own studies, I would agree with that. This parable shines light on political and economic exploitation in Jesus' and Matthew's times as well as in our own. That's a good thing, because we do need to pay attention to that, including how we participate in and profit from such systems, and we need to do all we can to change systems that are built on injustice and unfairness. That's part of our job description as people who try to be followers of Jesus. That's the work we're meant to do in God's vineyard. (Yes, God's vineyard that is growing right here in Manhattan.)

This parable also shines light on something more insidious: a very human tendency, one we all know only too well, that can undermine our own and others' well-being. It can not only poison our souls, but it can also effectively blind us to the bigger picture of unfairness on a systemic scale. And it can keep us from seeing and accepting God's grace.

The human tendency I'm talking about, and that Jesus points to in this parable, is the very human tendency to compare ourselves with others, to compare what we have to what others have. That tendency seems to be built in, or at least highly contagious, which is why it surfaces so early and easily in childhood. It's actually a helpful skill when properly used. Part of the work of growing up, of maturing, is using our tendency to compare ourselves to arrive at a realistic assessment and acceptance of our own strengths and weaknesses.

But there's more to our identity than our strengths and weaknesses. There is something even more important and more foundational; this parable points to that, too. It's something every bit as true and present as systems that exploit and every bit as true and present as our inclination to compare ourselves with others. And it's this: each of us is a beloved child of God. Each of us—day laborers who work and day laborers who stand idle, managers, owners of the vineyard, absentee landlords—all of us alike.

God creates each of us, loves each of us more than we can imagine, and showers us with grace that we don't and can't earn. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more, no matter how many hours we work. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any less, no matter if we stand idle or even if we exploit. God's grace is not a zero-sum game, so that giving to one leaves less for others. God doesn't work that way.

When we are able to see that and accept God's grace, for ourselves and for others, then the kingdom of heaven is revealed right here and right now. The kingdom of heaven not some time or place in the future; it can be right here and right now.

This parable calls each of us to notice and to change unfair systems, even or especially the ones we participate in and profit from. It calls each of us to look honestly at ourselves, to notice and change our own poisonous self-comparisons. It calls each of us to look for and to accept with thankful hearts the grace God is giving to us AND to others. It may even call us to help others notice and claim their own God-given grace.

Does that sound like a lot of work? You bet. That's the work in God's vineyard, and my friends, we've just been hired to do it.

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.