

What Do You Expect? (3d is a 3 part series – The Complexities of Relationships) Matthew 20:1-15  
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 14th Sunday after Pentecost (September 18,) 2011

<sup>20:1</sup> “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’ <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

Today’s sermon is the final installment in a **three part sermon series** dealing with THE **COMPLEXITIES OF RELATIONSHIPS**.

In **Week ONE** we saw Jesus instructing us on how to deal with conflict in human relationships. The keys were **LISTENING**, **HUMILITY**, and the **LACK OF JUDGMENTALISM**. But we also saw that **Jesus** placed that lesson in a particular setting – in the **CHURCH**. The **mission of the Church** is one of **RECONCILIATION** **not** **MORALITY POLICING**.

**What we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**

**Last week**, in **lesson #2**, we looked at the **ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT of FORGIVENESS** in relationships – **NOT AS A DUTY** we must honor when we are asked for it, but as **THE GIFT** of curing the **CANCER of UNforgiveness** in the person sinned against. Even when we don’t think we are able to forgive, we can **ACCEPT THE FREEDOM AND POWER GOD GIVES US** to forgive, when we **let God’s forgiveness flow through us.**

**What we bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what we loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**

By now – we accept the **plain and simple fact** that **RELATIONSHIPS ARE CHALLENGING**, but OH, **SUCH A REWARDING GIFT FROM GOD.**

**Relationships are at the heart of our religion** – indeed, **Jesus said that relationship is the central commandment to our Christianity.**

Today's Gospel points out to us what is **perhaps the most important, and yet unrecognized, barrier to having good relationships.**

Today's **Gospel is a difficult one**, for sure. Most people have problems with it. It seems that what Jesus is telling us SIMPLY IS NOT FAIR.

And, that, of course, is at the very essence of OUR FAITH, the very essential quality of Christianity. It's not fair.

**Our faith is based on GRACE and LOVE, not FAIRNESS.**

And how well we handle that really depends on where we find ourself in the picture.

- ⌘ We all tend to want JUSTICE for the other person and GRACE for ourself and for our own – YES?
- ⌘ If I sin against someone, I want forgiveness. If someone sins against me, I want justice – YES?

Let me share what is at the heart of today's Gospel lesson that Jesus is teaching about GOD:

When we look at the original language of the scripture, here, we see that Jesus used a word for wages that connotes WHAT A PERSON **NEEDS** for each day, **not** what they **EARN**. That's the tip that Jesus is talking about GRACE.

**God gives each of us enough Grace for the Needs of each day.** No more, no less. Grace – like time – cannot be hoarded, cannot be carried over from one day to the next.

Therefore, each worker in the field got what they needed.

The usual interpretation, therefore, of today's Gospel lesson is that God provides for our needs, and we **only get dissatisfied when we start to practice COMPARISONS** – when we start to compare what we get with what someone else gets.

By way of **example** – let's say you go to the store and find an **automobile** that you **really like**, for a really **good price**, and you buy it. You are **very happy** with this. Then you **discover** that a **friend** has purchased the very **same automobile** for about **five thousand dollars less**.

Even though the **product** you bought has **not changed one little bit**, and even though you got it for what you thought was a very good price, now you are upset about your purchase, because someone else got a better deal. That which was satisfying and happiness-producing now becomes distasteful. The **only thing to change was our making a comparison** to someone else.

Each worker in the field got all they needed. When it's GRACE, it can't be stored nor hoarded, but must be received anew each day. Nonetheless, the playing of the comparison game made the workers in the story, and (too often) the hearer of the story dissatisfied.

That's one very important teaching of today's Gospel. But, we are going to go deeper than that in today's sermon: we are going to look at **perhaps the most important, and yet unrecognized, barrier to having good relationships**.

### **EXPECTATIONS.**

They **can kill any good relationship**. And they are not necessary, although we have grown accustomed to thinking they are.

The **definition of EXPECTATION** that I've found is particularly helpful in understanding its role in relationships is this: **THE LINE BELOW WHICH NO GIFT IS ACCEPTABLE, REGARDLESS OF THE INTENT OR THE EFFORT IN ITS GIVING.**

[Ask the congregation to repeat that definition:

**THE LINE BELOW WHICH  
NO GIFT IS ACCEPTABLE,  
REGARDLESS OF THE INTENT  
OR THE EFFORT  
IN ITS GIVING.**

**EXPECTATIONS** blind us to seeing real gifts. For example, Little Johnny comes home from kindergarten, with two treasures from the day. Instead of making just one drawing, he made two – one for Mom and one for Dad. He can't wait to give them what he has worked so hard to make. Dad receives the drawing from his little chip-off-the-ol'-block, and says, "Wow! Great job there, Johnny. I'm going to take this to work and put it on my wall so people can see what a wonderful gift you made me."

Meanwhile, when Mom receives the drawing, she recognizes that Johnny's eye-hand coordination should be developed enough at this stage of life to draw within the lines. She thanks, Johnny, but tells him he really ought to pay more attention to what he is doing, and keep the crayon marks inside the line.

**Q:** In which drawing, did Johnny give more love? **A:** Neither.

**Q:** In which human transaction, did Johnny feel the most love? **A:** in the one where he did not feel like his gift was rejected as inferior.

If those same kinds of human transactions continue over the course of some years, indeed Johnny might find himself working harder and harder to try to please his mother, but also becoming **less and less concerned with her satisfaction**, because he begins to learn the lesson: There is a line of expectation, below which no gift is acceptable, and it seems that no matter how hard he tries, it's just never good enough. Oh, he **may try harder and harder to please her**, but the **relationship becomes less and less alive**.

No, I'm not saying that we don't need expectations in life. We have need of laws and job performance requirements.

But IN OUR INTERPERSONAL HUMAN RELATIONSHIP we do well to copy the example Jesus shows us that GOD FOLLOWS IN GOD'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH US.

Here **God gives according to the person's need**, **not according to the person's expectations**.

Here **Jesus illustrates** just **how INCREDIBLY STUPID humans can be** when they **walk away from a story and say: “GOD DID NOT LIVE UP TO MY EXPECTATIONS!”**

The **ALTERNATIVE** to EXPECTATIONS in **human-divine relationships** and in **human relationships** is **EXPECTANCY**.

**EXPECTANCY** is the openness to new and rewarding things happening, **without** a measuring stick for the **sufficiency** of them.

**EXPECTANCY** receives what your partner in relationship gives you with **gratitude**, instead of **conditional thanksgiving**.

**EXPECTANCY** is **open ended**, while **EXPECTATION** is **close-ended** and provides **very conditional gratitude**.

**Now, I grant you that this SEEMS like a very hard lesson to swallow. We have become so deeply invested in expectations, we have a hard time seeing an alternative.**

So, I can offer just **two things in defense** of this:

(1) **It's what Jesus taught.**

(2) **Your experience.**

Try, **for the next week**, to **quit evaluating the sufficiency of gifts given to you.**

Try, **this next week**, to tell yourself: **When someone brings me something, I am going to thank them, and not judge whether or not they really did the job of gift making well enough.**

Try, **this next week**, to start **looking at more of what comes your way as a gift, instead of “your due.”**

Try, **this next week**, to **see the goodness in what you receive** from people who are important to you – **as though the RELATIONSHIP with that person is MORE IMPORTANT that whether or not their offering meets some standard.**

Now, I'm going to warn you. This will **NOT be the SAME TEST for everyone.** For **people who have had a LIFETIME of experience of receiving CONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE from the significant people in their life – instead of unconditional acceptance – this will be harder. Don't give up. (Ask God to help you.)**

**Secondly,** I'm going to warn you: this is also **DEEPLY RELATED TO HOW YOU EXPERIENCE GOD.** **If God is for you only (or primarily) the GOD OF JUDGMENT,** you will have a **HARDER TIME** living with **open ended expectancy with people in your life.** **But, if** God is for you a **God of UNCONDITIONAL LOVE,** you will have an **easier time in letting go of RELATIONSHIP STUNTING EXPECTATIONS.**

And I accept the fact that – regardless of the GOOD NEWS that Jesus came to give – some people would rather stay with the BAD NEWS LIFE THEY KNOW than accept the GOOD NEWS of something different.

But – in any event – I hope that you will give it a try for at least one week. Then let me know how that works for you. I mean it: let me know.

**In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.**