

If Only One Side of the Zipper Works **Matthew 20:1-16**
 Saint Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV
 16th Sunday after Pentecost (September 21) 2014

Matthew 20:1-16

¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴and to them he said, ‘You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.’ ⁵So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.’ ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last.”

Today is the middle sermon in our series, “Home to Harmony.” Last week Janet preached on the text from Matthew about HARMONY within THE CHURCH. Today’s scripture is about HARMONY WITH THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. And next Sunday we will address HARMONY WITH SELF AND OTHERS, i.e. YOU CAN’T BE IN HARMONY WITH OTHER FOLKS IF YOU ARE OUT OF HARMONY WITH YOURSELF.

Today’s scripture is one of the ones that make preachers not want to preach from the lectionary. When this scripture comes up in the three year cycle – as the lectionary is designed to do – expose us to most of all the Bible’s teachings over a three year period – many preachers would rather preach from the Psalm or the Epistle or the First Testament.

People just don’t like this scripture. PERIOD.

The one most common expression in response to this scripture is “**That’s not _____ [fair].**”

So today, I want to do two things with the scripture:

(1) provide a way of looking at it that **may** make it a wee bit less offensive, and

(2) deal with what Jesus was trying to deal with – which was NOT labor relations management.

Some historical defining is essential to understanding. The amount of money that was offered, and paid, to each laborer, is called a DENARIUS. This is the amount of money commonly accepted in the first century Palestinian community as what is cost of living amount for one day. A person making a denarius would make enough money to provide food, clothing, and shelter basic needs for one day. Not frills, not extras, just the basic necessities.

Some people today would call it eight hours of pay at the minimum wage, or the daily amount set in “the poverty line” – but I think I’ll not go either of those places, as this scripture is already too politically charged as it is.

It is **noteworthy** Jesus used the word that refers to what a person needs instead of using other good words used elsewhere in the New Testament that mean **WAGES -- what is EARNED**.

One of those words is “**misthos**” [mis-thos']. Paul also uses it in **Romans 1.4: NOW TO ONE WHO WORKS, WAGES [MITHROS] ARE NOT RECKONED AS A GIFT, BUT AS SOMETHING DUE.**

The other word “**opsonion**” is used by Paul in **Romans 6.23: FOR THE WAGES (OPSONION) OF SIN IS DEATH, BUT THE FREE GIFT OF GOD IS ETERNAL LIFE IN CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD.**

Instead of using a word that means **SOMETHING THAT IS EARNED**, Jesus uses a term of currency – which just also happens to be what a person **NEEDED** to provide for their family for one day.

This is Jesus' distinction: Instead of using a word that means **WHAT IS EARNED** He used instead a term that referred to **WHAT IS NEEDED**.

There's another word – an **AMAZING WORD** – with which we are all familiar and which we all **CLAIM to really like**. That word summarizes this difference between **God giving WHAT WE HAVE EARNED** and **God giving WHAT WE NEED**. The word is **GRACE**.

It's no big secret, when we are honest with ourselves that **GRACE is what we want for ourselves**, and **JUSTICE is what we want for others**.

OK, we've finished the Greek word translation – boring, but necessary to get to the HEART of today's scripture: **GRACE comes in one size – SUFFICIENT**.

GRACE:

- ‡ we can't store it up;
- ‡ we can't accumulate it;
- ‡ we can't **COMPARE OUR PORTION WITH WHAT SOMEONE ELSE HAS**.

because Grace is **not** based on **what we have earned** – Grace is **based on what we need**.

That's the only way Grace is dispensed.

GRACE may be better understood when we see how much it is like the
TIME IN A DAY:

- ‡ we each receive the same amount
- ‡ we can't accumulate it; we use it or lose it
- ‡ we can only receive it as a gift.

For the sake of illustration, let's say **this is how much grace we can each need and get in each given day**. [demonstration: I pour water into, and fill up, an 8 ounce measuring cup.] This is the amount sufficient for you to face what is in store for you each day. This is how much you need. [Repeat the demonstration.]

If you were to receive more than 8 ounces – what would happen? [Demonstrate by pouring more water into the cup – it overflows onto the floor. (In deference to the trustees, a large container is placed beneath the illustration, protecting the marble floor from becoming a spill zone.)]

- This is not a principle unique to this one story. When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, they were taught to pray: **Give us this day our daily bread.**
- When God led the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land, He gave them food to eat – they called it *manna* and they were given **enough for each day. If they tried to gather extra, it would rot and smell bad.** (Exodus 16:4-16).

In our economy we believe people should get what they EARN; in the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus is teaching that people get what they need ... if they will receive it.

The teaching today begins with these words: **“For the kingdom of heaven is like”**

Let me briefly review some teaching from the sermon three weeks ago:

- **Scripture** shows us that *Jesus’ whole life, ministry, death, and resurrection were about the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN – more than any other thing.* (He talks about it **117** times, compared to a paltry **44** references to “salvation” or “being saved.” And those include **8 references** to people taunting Jesus on the cross: ***If you are the Son of God, save yourself.***”)
 - We also know from scripture that when He came preaching, His words were not limited to a place where we go on the other side of the doorway called death. He said: **the Kingdom of Heaven IS AT HAND.** Not just OVER THERE, but RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW.
 - And in that sermon 3 weeks ago, I gave you the metaphor **OF A ZIPPER** for Jesus who joined together the World of Five Senses and the Kingdom of Heaven at Hand,

So much of Jesus’ teaching was about our recognizing, and living AS IF, the Kingdom of Heaven is in our midst.

The **ZIPPER.** With only one half, it works as well as **ONE HAND CLAPPING.**

When we say we believe in Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven, but choose to live our lives as though the Kingdom of Heaven is not at hand, then we practice **FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM**.

I've seen a lot of that **FUNCTIONAL ATHEISM** in the life and politics of the Church.

We live in a **world of five senses** in which it seems that **people get what they earn**, but **God has a Kingdom at hand** where **people get WHAT THEY NEED**, not more, not less, ... **IF THEY WILL RECEIVE IT**.

Grace – like the Denarius – like the Manna – like the Daily Bread – like Time

- ‡ we **each receive the same** amount
- ‡ we **can't accumulate** it; we **use it or lose it**
- ‡ we **can only receive it as a gift**.

Now it may just be that you don't like how God does it any better than the first workers in the field. That's OK. Because God doesn't really care if you like how He does things. God does not take a poll or run a focus group to decide how God is going to do things. The only problem is that when you insist on God only giving what is "fair" instead of what God wants, you may find that "your God" is not much good when you need him.

When you go to zip up your pants, or your coat, it doesn't much matter whether you like it or not – if you have only half of the zipper, it just doesn't work. Like it or not, we need to get our life in harmony with this reality.

But, when you are out of options, and all your "earnings" aren't enough to get you through what you are facing, I hope you remember the God Who is generous and loving, and Who still wants to give you all that you need, regardless of whether you deserve it ... regardless of how many people you have groused about receiving God's grace in the past. God still welcomes us Home to Harmony.

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