

Sunday September 21, 2008
Duke Chapel
Dr. Maurice Wallace

A Strange Kind of Justice
Matthew 20:1-15

It is difficult, friends, to avoid being reminded of the historic calamities of last week's Wall Street in the light of today's lection text. First Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Then Bear Stearns. Now Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and AIG. Bankrupt. Taken over. Bailed out. Pending Acquisition.

I could not avoid recalling the havoc of last week's Wall Street listening to the disappointment of brokers, receptionists, computer technicians, and mail room workers at Lehman Brothers, object, on National Public Radio, to the bailout of Bear Stearns, and question the fairness of a system that preserves the jobs of brokers, receptionists, computer techs and mail room workers there, while leaving their counterparts at Lehman Brothers...well...just hangin. Abandoned. Uncertain. Afraid for their futures.

I could not resist thinking, about the trouble in our financial markets, and the inescapable conclusion we cannot help coming to, that far past the mysterious operations of a market whose peculiar behaviors exceedingly few of us intimately understand, this crisis (we know in our bones) is also owed to someone's greed, to systemic corruption, and to that brand of white-collar criminality encouraged by the very complex of narcissistic entitlement behind the complaints made in our text.

But against this same backdrop of financial failure and marketplace panic, I have to confess, Dean Wells, that I have had to wrestle with the implications of this parable. Wrestle with it because if I am honest, I have to admit that the protest of those hired early, those who labored longest, those who sowed seeds and tilled the ground long before those who merely reaped the harvest cultivated by others—if I am honest, there is a part of me—call it conscience, or my ethical compass—that believes that the protest of seniority in this parable, the sweat equity accrued by the first hired, and their time put into the landowner's enterprise, is not only reasonable but right. Their complaint has legs. They are, I cannot help but believe, also justified in their first-shaking protests.

I mean, who among us doesn't feel a more acute pity, for those who spend the majority of their adult lives punching the same company clock, day in and day out, only to be issued a pink slip twelve months before their retirement eligibility? Who among us wouldn't seek an explanation from a manager, a supervisor, a president, a trustee—someone!—whose regard for the company veterans seems so low and incommensurate with their years of service? Who wouldn't object to the kind of reply given, by the parable's landowner. A reply that sounds so unfair to working-class ears and almost insults the intelligence by claiming that is not only legal but ethical and just. "It's my money and I'll do as I please with it." Is the landowners defense. What a strange kind of justice, this is!

In these economically despairing times, when it would seem reasonable to hunker down, to gather and protect all the stuff that is rightfully yours—in times like these, this parable

conveys a strange justice indeed. Foreign to our sense that the amount of reward a man or woman receives ought to be in proportion to the measure of labor he or she has given, a sense reinforced with us every two to four weeks by a single word boldly printed on every worker's pay stub: "Earnings."

But I suppose there is a justice more original than rewards-justice. A justice older than our modern fair labor laws. A primordial justice with roots in eternity. A creation-justice, if you will, that has its perfect expression in the accidental wisdom of this disgruntled field hand, who has perverted the truth of creation into an indictment against his benevolent bossman. "You made them equal to us," is spoken as an injustice, a transgression, an ethical offense. And yet it is the very truth that distinguishes the ethos, the character, the matchlessness, of *this* vineyard, *this* kingdom, *this* place, from every other competing kingdom.

For in this landowner, Jesus has given us a glimpse of our God, who has surely made the last equal to first. In creation he made them equal. Male and female. Equal. Black and White. Equal. Documented and Undocumented. Equal. Executive and Housekeeper. Equal. Preacher and Prostitute. Equal. Yes. He made them equal. That's not a thing to pout about. That's a thing to shout about! Rejoice in! Exult over! Stand on! Rally around!

Not because the last got promoted to first and first got demoted to last. *Not* because slave became free and free was enslaved. But because neither first nor last nor slave nor free are meaningful categories in kingdom community. You see, when last became first, first and last stood beside one another. And now, standing beside last, first has become as last—equal with him—without moving one inch.

We exult in Christ *not* because of the fact alone that He made us as equal, but in making us as equal, He revealed something more amazing. He revealed Himself. His personality and predilection to see justice ever through the tinted glass of mercy. Through blood-stained lenses of grace. Grace—that mystery and miracle in God that is always in excess of favor deserved. Grace—that condition of congenital benevolence passed down by God on us for the sake of others. Grace—A. W. Tozer, defined it as "the good pleasure of God that inclines him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving. It is a self-existent principle," he said, "inherent in the divine nature and appears to us as a self-caused propensity to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just disapprobation." Grace.

I perceive that there's a kind of justice in Jesus, strange though it may seem, that is irreparably gracious. Driven *not* so much by what is owed to us, as by what we owe to one another. A justice inspired *not* by a feeling that we are an entitled people, but that we are an obliged people. A people obliged to share what we may well steward but surely did not create. Obligated to lift up the least, the lost and the last. Obligated to the self-same hospitality we received in Christ. For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Locked out of the promise, Christ gave us a key. Hungry for hope, He fed us. Naked of purpose, He clothed us in garments for praise. Wards without an inheritance, he adopted us. And now, by him, we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifying with our spirit that we are the children of God!"

What a strange kind of justice this is! That discounts deservedness and puts a premium on graciousness. What a strange kind of justice! So generous. So merciful that it stands against all claims of rank, all presumptions of entitlement, all declarations of deservedness.

What a strange justice. He requires of us, now. Now, more than ever. Since the condition that is among our day's most acute afflictions is that syndrome, that complex of the moral mind, that has sold us all on the fiction of our entitlement. This is the age of entitlement. We deserve exactly what we want, we say. Entitled to it, because it's available, and if others can have it, then why shouldn't I? If the 1960s and 1970s was the age of Aquarius—remember? “This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius”—then the 1980s and beyond has been the age of entitlement.

Is it me? Or is the atmosphere full us of the feeling of entitlement? Our children feel entitled to I-phones, flat screens and Play Station. Fortune 500 executives feel they are entitled to luxury jets, private islands, and hundred million dollar severance packages. The planet earth is routinely raped of natural resources by national and multinational interests who feel...well...entitled. Even among devout Christians, attitudes of entitlement masquerade behind pretensions of piety and chosenness. And this strain of our moral sickness is perhaps more virulent than the others because unlike a lot of teenagers and corporate executives and governments and multinational interests, the Christian church claims an alternate reality, and a more selfless witness.

The hypocrisy of the Christian church, I blush to confess, is that we, too, feel entitled. Not just to tax exemptions, but we feel entitled to grace itself. Let's be honest. We *expect* blessings, because we imagine *we* are good—live clean lives, pray daily, are active in church and community. But if there is any reason to expect our blessings, it has nothing at all to do our good standing. Rather, it is the Father's good pleasure, glimpsed in the character of gracious landowner, portrayed in a parable by a discerning carpenter, passing the time on a journey from the Jordan to Jerusalem, that is the justification for our profits of life, health, and comfort.

What a strange kind of justice. In which entitlement is poverty, and grace, wealth unbound. What a strange justice, to deem men and women of low estate worthy of such high reward. What a strange justice. To revile sin and yet redeem sinners (and call them friends). What a strange kind of justice. Strange. Surprising. And Wonderful. Amen.