

## Proper 20A: The Vineyard

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By all accounts it's been a difficult couple of weeks in our country: Hurricane victims are struggling to regain some semblance of life as they know it, the poorest or course having been hit the hardest some communities having suffered more than once in the last few years. Wallstreet suffered it's worst blow since the depression and we don't know yet how or when things financial are going to settle down. And overall things are tough – housing values have plummeted, the economy remains unpredictable to the point of making the headlines every day. The political scene is exciting but also plays on varieties of emotions, often raising our anxieties as much as our hopes. And even in the realms of religious bodies there seems to be an ongoing and public competition lately to claim who is the most faithful of the faithful. It's not a stretch to say that we live in highly competitive, anxious times and I think that on some level we must all be wrestling with that. The gaps between us seem to be getting larger rather than smaller and often those in leadership feed those gaps and those anxieties rather than helping to create new opportunities for some form of steady, common ground.

And so today we have this parable where a vineyard owner gives everyone the same thing and rather than celebration, there's a near rebellion. And I get it. This landowner went out early in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. They agreed to the usual daily wage and went to work. Then about 9:00 the landowner went out again, hired more laborers to whom he said , “you also go into the vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.” And they went. Presumably seeing that there was more work to be done or maybe being motivated by the fact

that there were workers who needed a place, the landowner did the same thing at noon and three o'clock. And then finally at five he sent out one more group of laborers into the fields. And everything was fine . . . until the laborers got paid. The landowner had his manager begin with the last and then move towards the first and the last were given a full daily wage and the shock was that so were those hired at noon and so were those who had been there all day. And that's when the screaming started. Those who had in their words "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" got the same as everyone else. They expected more. They expected better. They expected fairness and justice as defined by the world.

But what they got instead was a first-hand experience of a different approach. Think of it this way. Whether the people had invested heavily or not so much they were guaranteed the same return, everyone was given enough to live on. Whether they'd been blown about by one storm or another or were able to establish themselves in one place, no matter which -- they received the same amount. Whether they were wealthy or poor or had faithfully been working away hour after hour, or just happened to drop by at the last minute while the landowner was making final rounds -- no matter what they got exactly the same pay as the next guy.

And like the all-day workers our initial reaction to this parable falls along the lines of it not being fair that everyone was treated equally. But rather than crying out against this way, maybe it should bring us relief. There is no competition that determines the ending of this story, there is only grace. There is no need in this story for the people to justify themselves, instead there is pure mercy. There is no widening gap between those who have and those who don't -- everyone gets the same thing. The same grace and the same mercy the same "what you need to live"

as the next guy. And given the unpredictability of our world this would seem like extremely good news. It means that the gifts of the kingdom are not a gamble – they are a given – for everyone.

And so in this place too – in the church- that’s our model. No matter when you come (although we encourage regular participation and an arrival time of about 5 minutes before the service begins.) No matter how much you bring (although we encourage extreme generosity.) No matter how many Sunday School classes you’ve taught or commissions you’ve been on (although we believe that such participation enhances everyone’s sense of community and faith). No matter where you rate on the scale from reprobate to faithful (although of course we encourage a commitment to spiritual discipline and Christian formation). No matter any of those things -- You get the same welcome. You get the same peace. You are offered the same absolution. You get the same prayers and the same song. You receive the same bread and the same wine and the same blessing as everyone else. No matter what.

And that’s the gift we have to give the world. We are not the world. Unlike the anxiety producing tactics and tendencies that come into play out there, we are the most surprisingly predictable place on the planet. Ask here and you will receive here. Knock on these doors and the doors will be opened to you. At the end of our day each is given the same grace and peace and forgiveness and feast and call to share these gifts with the world. And we see this not as injustice but as the mercy we need and this world desperately needs more of. So no matter what your week has been like, open your heart and your mind and your soul and your life to the gifts of God which are for all the people of God, no matter what.