

Preachers sometime have to make a hard choice deciding on what to say in their sermons, especially when there is too much good stuff in the texts you are given. I think this week's lectionary texts are the case. You have this Matthew text which is really the jewel of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of heaven. It is interesting that if you read Matthew's Gospel carefully, this particular story, along with other stories of the same topic, is followed by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

We know what this means; Jesus is going into Jerusalem not to be inaugurated as the king of the nation; we know he will not go in there in a limo to be televised as an American idol on national TV; he will not go in there to preach about "How to become rich and prosper" in a football field. Jesus will be going into Jerusalem to fail, at least to the knowledge of the crowd who followed him all that way to get high and prestigious. Jesus will be betrayed and killed. He knew he would be deserted even by his disciples.

So if we try to see and feel today's Gospel lesson with all this in our minds, I think, this text really says all that Jesus wanted to say throughout his ministry!

The first becomes last; and the last becomes first. Open your eyes! What you see is not what you will get! The world will be upside down; there will be a great reversal; you need to lose if you want to gain; you need to go down if you want to go up; you need to give up if you ever want to have! Wake up! The kingdom of heaven works totally opposite!

Think for a moment about which group you belong to among those workers! Are you among those who went out early in the morning or those who got a call around 10 minutes before and went to work at 5 PM but got the same wage?

We are in a troubled time now; economic downturn push many people out of jobs; with the financial crisis we are facing, we don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. I remember a few years ago when the housing prices were skyrocketing, life seemed very unfair to many people who could not afford to buy a home.

A minister friend of mine called me a couple of months saying, "Well, those of you who do not own homes are the luckiest people in the world." The reason was that he was one of those lucky people who had bought houses four years ago and was losing his home to foreclosure. He lost his job and could not pay the bills. To him, life may have seemed even more unfair. I am very sorry for people who are in similar situations. It is a hard time we have to go through.

But I want to tell you that even though life sometimes may seem very unfair, God is never unfair.

Responding to the complaint of those who came early in the morning and got the same wage, the owner of vineyard said: "Friends, I have not been unfair. I paid you what I promised to pay you. Go away with your money! Don't be jealous because I am too generous to others."

Barbara Brown Taylor says this: "Even when we know that the blessings that come to us have been delivered to the wrong address, there are not many of us who will send them back.

We thank God quickly and carry them inside. But when we look out the window and see the delivery man carrying an identical package next door, to those really unpleasant people who sit on their porch drinking beer after beer, playing their music too loudly until 2 O'clock in the morning, and whose children stray into our yard only to make mess which we have to clean up. We believe undeserved blessings are only supposed to go to the deserving, apparently." (*Emphasis*, current edition).

It is not God but we who are unfair. It is we who draw many lines between who deserve and who we think don't deserve. God never draws a line between people based on how we look; how much we make a year; and what language we speak. It is we who do all that!

God's vineyard is open to everyone; those with good resumes and those with not-so good resumes, those who are able and those who are not-so-much-able, everyone is invited; everyone deserves something.

God's EXTRAVAGANT love reaches to all God's people regardless of who they are.

But that does not mean God's grace is cheap. As much as God is fair in his love and graciousness, he is also fair in asking all his people to show a proof called discipleship. Remember Matthew put this story in his Gospel *right before* Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Unless we show our willingness to take up our cross and follow Jesus' footsteps, the first will become last.

I think Paul is an example of all this. Even though he didn't really deserve, he knew how blessed he was; he knew what the love of God was like; he knew what the love of God could do in people's lives; he knew how people's lives could change when they met with Christ.

For Paul, however, the love of God was never cheap; and God was never unfair; he knew the love of God sometimes comes to us more abundantly in hardships and struggles.

In the Philippian text, Paul is in prison; he was incarcerated. But he never said God was unfair. No, God was even fairer in that situation because his heart was full of joy and love.

It didn't really matter. The walls of the prison cell could not contain his joy for the Gospel; the incarceration could not stop him from extending his love even to his enemies.

He says: "Don't be afraid in any way of those who oppose you. You must not only believe in God. You must also suffer for Him." Wow! How can you do it?

God is love; and that love never has a limit.

God's vineyard is for everyone. Maybe because of this, we always think we deserve more. But we never think we need to say thank you even more in hardships. We think we deserve more. That sometimes makes us forget we need to be last to be the first. God is just. So we always talk about fairness; we demand justice. But we never raise

Philippians 1:20-30; Matthew 20:1-16; "God's Vineyard"; 9/21/08; Albany UMC

voices enough about our own sacrifices; we never press ourselves hard enough for servanthood or giving ourselves to others.

God's vineyard has a special rule; do you want to be the first? Be last.