

Proper 20, Year A

Twelve years ago, when I was serving as an Episcopal school chaplain, I taught a class called "Introduction to the Bible." One of the students in the class was named Caytie Smith, who was bright, articulate, a bit combative and liked to be the center of attention. I can't help to think how pleased Caytie would be to know that she made one of my sermons.

She was an especially good student when it came to essays and exams, and I'm mentioning her today because of the NT paper she wrote during the spring term of that course.

Her paper was titled "Parables that make me really mad," a very catchy title, but also a very good paper, where this 15 year old examined the Prodigal Son, because she felt that the older brother got a raw deal. She examined the parable of the unjust judge, where the judge gives a woman what she pestered him for, not because he cared for her, but because he wanted her to go away."

"How can God be a comparison for that?" Caytie would ask.

Today's gospel lesson is another one of the stories Caytie analyzed in that paper, where she saw how people who worked one hour got the same pay as those who had worked all day, and declared "That's not fair!"

What a phrase. Is there any parent or teacher who hasn't had to repeatedly respond to that declaration?

My knee jerk response to that has always been: "What ever gave you the impression that life is fair?" and I mean it, I see good things and bad things happen all the time to people, without any simple cause and effect relationship like "they deserve it." WE should behave as fairly as possible, but that doesn't mean life works that way.

Then Caytie or someone like her would ask: "Why should I be good now, if I'll get the same pay for only being good near the end?" To which I would answer the Q with a Q, "Are you telling me your sole motivation for good behavior is the expectation of a reward? I usually got a long pause at this point.

There are two messages that emerge from this parable and the tale of a young student. The first is that this parable, along with much of the NT, is telling us that Christ's religion is a matter of grace, not law. God's generosity to those who couldn't find work earlier in the day is not something that calls for a begrudging response from those of us who have worked longer.

Law says so much pay for so much work. Grace says God desires everyone's needs to be met.

Law says there is a pecking order. Grace says all are loved equally.

Law says condemnation. Grace says forgiveness. Christ offers grace.

The second point is a response to the Q of why we should live good lives if we're not going to get a better deal for doing so.

Isn't it amazing how we take life for granted. What did we do to plant the spark of life in us? What did we do to set the world in motion?

The way in which we live our lives is how we say "thank you" to God for the gift of our lives; it's a response not a bargaining tool. And of course we fail in our attempts, and that is why repentance and forgiveness are always available.

The gift of life has been given, Christ is risen, eternal life granted. Thank God for his generosity. Live thankfully. Amen.