

A sermon preached in the Parish of the Epiphany by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, based upon Matthew 20, in lectionary year A.

The west side of Berkeley, California, the part closest to Interstate 80 and the Bay of San Francisco is referred to as the flats. In a town otherwise known for its beautiful homes nestled into the hills overlooking the Bay, the flats have modest homes, reminiscent of a day when Berkeley was just an average college town. In one part of the flats, the corner of San Pablo Avenue and Gilmore Street there's a huge parking lot. Large posters are stapled to the utility poles that read "No Parking. Day laborers only." Every day of the week, usually between 7:00 and 10:00 in the morning, the lot is full of men seeking employment, by noon another group huddles to get hired, and again late in the afternoon. A kind of community forms among them, at least that was always how I imagined it whenever I drove by. But by late afternoon, usually by 3:00 or so, the lot is empty, and the dot-com millionaires of the late 1990s could zoom their new cars into the lot and leap up the back steps of the buildings to figure out the next initial public offering. By that point in the day, the "undocumented workers"--the word we would use for them these days--have either gotten a job for the day, or thrown in the towel, hoping that tomorrow will yield enough cash to feed the mouths at home in California, as well as the loved ones back home in Mexico or in other parts of Central America.

It has always been thus. Our gospel reading describes a similar scene, though this particular parable is found only in Matthew. For those of you who have been around a lot this year, it won't surprise you that Matthew alone has this story. His perspective on life with God is radical and disabuses us at times from notions that kingdom living isn't easy. Last week's 77 x 7 is yet another example.

At the outset let's state what it's NOT about, this parable. First, it's not about worries about money or unemployment, nor is it about the injustice of immigration law, or about the living wage. Of course, we sympathize with the workers crying out for fairness. Truth be told many of us mask our envy by demanding justice. But, the parable isn't about envy, either, any more than it is about labor practice in first century Palestine, or gullible workers, or capricious landowners.

It's about the kingdom of heaven. Which is to say, a place where God is God and we are not, and where no one is left without enough. I think it's a place where a controversial grace abounds, so controversial in fact that this story, along with the parable of the loving father in Luke's gospel, burns some of us into a fit of fury.

I once heard a preacher tell a story about when he was a seminarian and living and working in East Harlem, New York. He said he tried one day in his youthful eagerness to talk a bookie out of his vocation. The bookie listened to the seminarian very patiently and then he said, "Son, one of these days you're going to be a preacher, aren't you?" The seminarian responded, "Yes, why?" The bookie said, "You believe in grace then, don't you?" The

seminarian said, "Yes, why?" The bookie continued, "I'll tell you why, Son. You believe in grace and I believe in gambling. And that means both of us believe life is good when it's something for nothing."

I don't know about gambling, but the bookie was right about grace. It makes winners out of human beings. We get something for nothing so that we can live our lives gratefully. When we live in a world of merit we estrange ourselves from God, yet in the world of grace, we're always at home with God.

Next month we're going to launch a new program at the Epiphany, focusing on our mission and outreach ministries. We're going to challenge every single person during the month of October to commit to a one-time or an ongoing initiative that helps us transform the world. Stay tuned for more about this. The coming attraction announcement right now is to underscore what some of you already know...and I know this because you tell me, which is that you get far more out of your giving than people whom you serve receive from you.

And that takes us to the question about the meaning of this parable. In the end, it's about God's generosity. God's generosity. The God who has given us life promises to walk with us, not just in the sunlight of high noon when faith comes easy and all's right with the world but also in the darkness of midnight, when it's hard to see a way forward, or when the path is uncertain, and the road is utterly foreign.

What God desires, and we know this because of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is to give us abundant, rewarding, and unending life and love. Whatever pain, or heartbreak, or terrible anxiety we might have, the God of love reaches out to you and to me and gives us hope. And in the same way that the owner of the vineyard got more from giving than the workers did from getting paid, once we feel God's boundless generosity, it's impossible to begrudge it to others.

Let me close with an anecdote from Gilead, the novel by Marilynne Robinson which was a best seller a couple of years ago. The main character is the Reverend John Ames, a pastor of a small Iowa congregation in the hard times of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. Ames says,

I was thinking about the things that had happened here [in this town] just in my lifetime – the droughts and the influenza and the Depression and three terrible wars. It seems to me now we never looked up from the trouble we had just getting by to put the obvious question, that is, to ask what it was the Lord was trying to make us understand."

Look up from whatever trouble we have, whether it's your life or something more global and systemic, or into the eyes of those day laborers in the flats of Berkeley, or the Home Depot lot of Brockton...look up from that trouble and hear Christ giving you an urgent message about God's generosity. We're going to get by, and even more than getting by, there will be generosity surpassing our understanding. This is more than good news, it's great news. Welcome to the kingdom.

