

THE MESSAGE

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Matthew 20:1-16

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

Family Dynamics

What do you think of when I say the word - green?

Green is the new “cool” color, and everybody, it seems, wants to go green, environmentally that is. We want to do what we can to protect and improve the environment regarding our use and our misuse of natural resources. Interestingly, 20 years ago - green would have been associated with money, namely getting more of it. And 20 years before that - green was primarily associated with one of the seven deadly sins: green with envy.

Envy is one of the least admirable traits in all of us. And yet, have you noticed; envy gains momentum during tough economic times like we are in right now. When things are plentiful and abundant, we tend to have less of a problem when others are succeeding and getting what they want. But when things grow scarce, envy is always on the rise.

According to Wikipedia - Envy is best defined as “an emotion that occurs when a person lacks another’s (*perceived*) superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other didn’t have it.”

Bertrand Russell (a British philosopher, mathematician, historian, socialist, pacifist, and social critic in the early 1900) said *envy is one of the most potent causes of unhappiness. It is a universal and most unfortunate aspect of human nature because not only is the envious person rendered unhappy by envy, but also wishes to inflict misfortune on others.*

Envy is not a good thing...

Jesus teaches about envy and its destructive power in our reading for today. Listen to the parable he tells, and let’s consider what it is saying to us about envy in our lives.

(Read Matthew 20:1-16)

It might be easy for us to identify with the servants who have worked all day long, and feel the way they felt towards the owner of the vineyard. It doesn’t seem fair. That’s the word. It’s not fair! It doesn’t seem fair that they are paid the same wage as those who only worked part of the day.

So let's consider what this story is telling us.

First, notice the landowner's motivation. Out of generosity, he wants to help others earn the daily wage necessary to meet their needs. The owner, it seems, wants all people to be able to earn what they need, and seeks a way throughout the day to help that happen for more and more people.

The landowner's motivation is revealed in his first question to the people standing in the marketplace. ***"Why are you standing here idle all day?"*** The owner, it seems, wants everyone to be productive and not be idle. Regardless of when they began working, the landowner is pleased that they are contributing rather than being unproductive.

I believe God's motivation for all people is revealed here. God wants us (everyone of us) to invest ourselves in God's work and not remain dormant. Idleness creates many problems: low self-esteem, destructive behaviors, and hopelessness, to name a few. God, it seems, wants us to thrive and live with a purpose, to be productive, working in God's vineyard.

This mindset, this perspective has not occurred to the people who were hired at the beginning of the day. So it seems. They are only thinking about themselves and what's in it for them, namely the amount of time and effort they have invested on behalf of the landowner. They are very much aware that people kept joining them throughout the day, working shorter and shorter hours alongside them. So they compare themselves to the others.

Envy is really a social sin, always triggered in comparing ourselves to others. And guess what? We all do it. We all compare ourselves to others. **That is the second thing we learn from Jesus' story.** Our focus as workers in God's vineyard is to do the work that God is asking each one of us to do, which does not involve us comparing ourselves to others.

Notice the second question the landowner asks the same people who have now become disgruntled workers because they are comparing themselves to others. ***"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?"***

Oh... if you and I could stay focused on that perspective and help everyone who is working in this vineyard called Friedens to stay focused, our envy could be kept in check. If we could just stay focused on the work that God is giving us to do together in this place and not compare ourselves to one another... oh the things we could do... for God... in this vineyard...

You see, the God that we worship is not fair. That's right. You heard it here - God is not fair! God is generous to one and all. **That's the third thing we learn from this story.** God blesses us to be a blessing to others.

God provides. God, the ultimate landowner, provides a way for everyone to have their daily needs met. No one is excluded... every worker gets paid... everyone working in God's vineyard receives... everyone gets the same good graces from God...

According to Wikipedia - *envy is often rooted in a poor feeling about oneself – low self-esteem*. So dealing with the weed of envy begins first with affirmation. Here's the thing, **you matter to God**. We all do! So turn to your neighbor right now and tell him or her – “you matter to God.”

What if, part of our work in God's vineyard involves sharing that message regularly, telling everyone we meet that they matter to God...

What if, when you got home today you walked over to your neighbor and told him/her that he or she matters to God and therefore matters to you...

Can you see how the weeds of envy would quickly disappear?

The Mission Trip to RI this past week was a way for us to do God's work using our hands and feet and backs. We would clean out people's basements that were flooded back in March and now have black mold and mildew growing on everything -- as you saw from the video announcement. We were doing grunt work – well I wasn't I was working in the dumpster stacking and packing it all.

People couldn't believe we were there to do what we were doing and not expect to get paid. When I would tell people on the street who we were and what we were doing the look on their faces was - priceless. We would shower at the YMCA. One day the staff behind the counter at the door asked me, “Who are you and what are you doing?” So I told them, “We are a mission team from Friedens Lutheran Church in Myerstown, PA helping to clean up after the flood.” One guy said, “Oh yeah, the flooding nobody talks about that any more.” It's only been 2 ½ months...

And yet, there is still so much work to be done. The old saying, out of sight out of mind, still holds true. The people we serve matter to God and so they matter to us and we did what we could to help them get their lives back on a healthy track.

I've learned that envy can easily lead to destructive behaviors. And I'm speaking from personal experience here. Envy can lead to destructive behaviors unless we are reminded daily that **God is generous**. And we are to share that generosity with others. So turn to your neighbor right now and tell them, “God is generous.”

Our Mission Trip to RI taught us to appreciate what God has given us because it can all be taken away. We were working in God's vineyard doing so in Jesus' name. And we received more than what we gave. Oh the look on the client's faces (I called them clients) was life-giving. Words cannot even begin to describe the payment of satisfaction we received for doing God's work this past week. I hope you all get a chance to go on a mission trip like that. It will change your life for good!

Here's the amazing thing about God and working in God's vineyard; we are all different because God made us that way. Our calling in the body of Christ is different according to our gifts and talents. But together we can do some amazing things. Together we make a great team. The Mission Team is one such example.

Jesus calls us to operate with a different set of values and a different scorecard than the rest of the world. That is why Jesus says, "The first will be last, and the last first." Notice - the landowner intentionally paid the last first and the first last to point out - to the workers that what God values is not what we humans value, which became a teaching tool for understanding God and God's vineyard and our part in it.

God's way of measuring value is not the way the world chooses to value people and their contributions. The Kingdom of God rewards people differently than the way the world rewards people. The tension for us is to live in this world, and its crazy value system, with eternity in our focus every day. We are to say and do things in Jesus' name so that people realize that they matter to God and that God is gracious to one and all for all eternity.

Story -- Malcolm Muggeridge worked for the BBC as a reporter. By his own admission, he was a very arrogant and self-centered person before he met Christ. Consequently, he was interviewing Mother Teresa before he became a Christian, and he had the rudeness to ask her this question: "How come I get to spend my days with kings, presidents, and prime ministers, and you have to spend your days with the broken, the sick, and the outcast of our world?" Mother Teresa smiled, and simply said in a very humble tone: "That's easy: because you're not worthy."

In that one sentence, we see the completely topsy-turvy reality of the Kingdom of God. It echoes the verses where Jesus says, "Those who have done it for the least of these my brothers and sisters have done it unto me."

When it comes to God and God's vineyard (God's kingdom) there is no need for anyone to be idle. There is a place for everyone. Therefore we need not be envious because God is generous. It reminds me of the cartoon I saw years ago and have been looking for a time to share it. Here is my big moment. This guy standing up in the middle of a crowd speaking to the leader,. The caption over his head reads, "I don't want to be first or last. I just want to wallow around in the middle."

I don't know about you but I don't particularly care if I'm first or last. I am just thankful that I've been chosen by God to be a worthy worker in God's vineyard. God is indeed generous and you and I matter to God. If God is generous then we can be generous too. If people matter to God then they matter to us too.

We need not be envious because God is generous. We simply need to be... **thankful.** Are you? Amen.