

WHAT A LORD! EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL (MT 20:1-16)

Sermon by the Rev. Corinne Hodges

Sunday, Sept. 21, 2008, SJOC

The sermon was preached using the outline below.

- I. Where is the generous business owner when you need him? Our economic times today seem so far from the economic picture painted in Gospel
 - A. Time when there is so much work that the company/factory/business has enough positions for all
 - B. The hiring manager has such a need that he/she keeps going out into the marketplace looking for new people to hire
 - C. Rather than cutting shifts, decreasing hours or pay, owner increases workers' wages, surprises them with a full day's pay for just one hour—can you imagine?
 - D. So much abundance, so much opportunity—life would be good!
 - E. This story can stir up much emotion, emotion on all sides, depending on who you identify with.

- II. Who is this story actually about?
 - A. First-hired
 - 1. First to answer the ad, at employment office bright & early, bold & speak up for themselves, reputations as hard workers, good at networking, better skill set
 - 2. Resentful at owner for not being paid more than others
 - B. The people who need a job, can't get hired and then finally do
 - 1. Passed over again and again, waiting in line, encouraged to be patient
 - 2. Are hired and told they will be paid what is "right"—no agreed upon amount, no contract, not even handshake
 - 3. Perhaps so desperate for work, figured "What do we have to lose?"
 - 4. Any job is better than no job. Any pay is better than no pay.
 - C. Landowner
 - 1. Plenty of resources, money does not seem to be an issue
 - 2. Hires not just first choice candidates, but 2nd, 3rd, 4th & 5th
 - 3. In fact, Lord who keeps hiring until all people are brought in, employed, needed and wanted

- III. Story is about all three
 - A. You and I both have been in the shoes of the first two, perhaps not in the case of actual labor/work, but in other ways

1. One of the fortunate ones who received something in return for hard work, based on merit; included in a group from the get-go; we got the job, we got the chance to prove ourselves
 2. Also been one of the excluded ones: looked over, felt forgotten, left out. Wanted something badly/needed it, but had to wait a long time for things to happen
 3. There's the jealousy of the first group—we've experienced that, times when we feel others don't deserve what they get, certainly in comparison to the work we've put in
 4. Surprising gifts to the last group—received pleasant surprises for nothing we have done in particular—we did not work for them, things just happened and we benefited
- B. Landlord we can't quite understand
1. Must have known he was going to stir things up by offering same pay to all
 2. Anyone could add up hrs. and see groups put in diff. hrs. of work and therefore deserved diff. amount in return
 3. But then we have to remember that this is a parable—compares the Kingdom of God to situation on earth
 4. Only way we can begin to understand this landlord is to remember that the landlord is God
 5. Focus our attention not on what the laborers do, but on what God does and why
 - a. God searches high and low for more people to bring into the fold (great shepherd—searches after the one)
 - b. Not only that, God sees everyone as equal—whether we work hard or not, whether we are a part of the in-crowd or out, we all receive the same (MT's time, religious establishment was in)
 - c. The meaning behind "the first will be come last and the last will become first"—when you average out the numbers, what do you get? They all are the same.
 - d. Now this may not seem fair/just, but we are talking about God and the Kingdom of God, eternal life not earth
 - e. Logic on earth is not necessarily logic in heaven and vice versa
 - f. God seeks to provide for all; we often only look out for ourselves

- IV. A natural reaction to this story, especially of the hard workers who have opportunity could be:
- A. If everyone is going to have a place, why work so hard? Why put forth the effort to do good when all are treated equally in the end?
 - B. If God loves me, includes me, forgives me anyways, why not live and do just as I want?

- C. We should desire to do good, work God has given us, because of our call to discipleship (follow JC) also out of gratitude.
 - D. This is where the first-hired lost it—when they received their payment, although it was exactly what they were told it would be and it was an honest day’s wage, they were ungrateful.
 - E. Instead of being happy with what they received, they compared it to what the others had. It wasn’t enough then. Instruction: “Take what belongs to you and go,” should have been easy. Was not.
- V. In visits with parishioners, some of conversation led to whether there were any upsides to the recent economic downturn. So much has been said about the inevitability of the falling economy. Are we learning anything from it?
- A. We spend more time at home—more family time, children, couple
 - B. Eat better/healthier, having to cook own meals—gone back to eating together as a family
 - C. Spend more wisely—with less \$, we have to prioritize, define what is really important to us
 - D. Resourcefulness—make things last, find a way to make ends meet
 - E. What became abundantly clear, what I heard again and again from people: even though times are tough, we still have blessings in our lives, things we can be thankful for
 - F. And God has given us these blessings freely
 - G. When we reflect on this, when all the dust from everything that is happening around us settles, we hear the truth...
- VI. We can lose things, opportunities, even our place here on earth, but we can never lose our place with God. **GOD ALWAYS HAS AN OPENING FOR US IN GOD’S KINGDOM.**
- A. The answer to that question of where is the Lord of abundance when you need him...well, he’s right here, always has been.
 - B. What a Lord! With God, there truly are equal opportunities for all!