

## Meadowbrook Congregational Church

### “Faulty Accounting”

September 18, 2011

Reverend Art Ritter

#### **Matthew 20: 1-16**

*20'For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" <sup>7</sup>They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'*

I am not a person who likes to use coupons. I appreciate a bargain but sometimes the clipping and the storage and the reading the fine print can be more of a hassle that I care to experience.

I recall a time when I had a valuable coupon for the laundering of my dress shirts. I think it was \$2 off a minimum of ten shirts. As I prepared to take the shirts to the dry cleaners, I couldn't find the coupon. I searched through the grocery coupons. I sorted through the basket beside the telephone. I shuffled through all of that really important stuff in the junk drawer of the kitchen. I even went through the trash, thinking that I might have thrown it away by mistake. All I got was watermelon juice and spaghetti sauce all over my hands. But I was bound and determined to find that coupon and save myself \$2. Finally, after twenty minutes of searching, I found the elusive coupon, pinned underneath the garage door opener in the car. Happily, I took my shirts to the cleaners.

Once inside the dry cleaners I gave my dozen or so shirts to the clerk and proudly presented to her my coupon. I felt good that my long search was now being properly rewarded. I was thinking about where I might spend my \$2- perhaps an ice cream cone, a hamburger, or a half gallon of gas! Maybe I could even throw it in the offering plate at church! My Mom and Dad and my high school coaches were right. If you keep working at something, if you persevere, if you never give up, you will find a reward. And my experience with that coupon taught me that.

But the story wasn't over. The clerk was just completing my work order, light starch on hangers, ready for pick up in 48 hours, when a gentleman walked in with a laundry order similar to mine. Another clerk came to the counter to assist him. She asked the gentleman, "Do you

have a coupon?" The gentleman sadly shook his head no. "Aha!" I wanted to exclaim. I had found my coupon and I was saving \$2. This poor fellow was not. How clever was I? How much better than he was me? Those twenty minutes searching for that \$2 coupon were justified in the self righteousness of that one shining moment.

Just then the clerk assisting the gentleman said, "Oh, that's all right. You really don't need to coupon. We'll just go ahead and charge you the coupon rate."

What? Were my ears deceiving me? This guy didn't need the \$2 off coupon to get his shirts cleaned at the same rate as me? He didn't need a valuable coupon to reap the very same benefits that I so rightly deserved?

The consequences of that moment were staggering. Where was justice? Where was fairness? What happened to the good old work ethic? Could Mom and Dad and all of my coaches have been wrong? Suddenly I felt as if I had wasted those twenty minutes of my life I had spent searching for that coupon.

As a baseball fan I remember the inaugural World Baseball Classic in 1996. The tournament brought together the very best baseball players on the planet, representing their nations in a two week tournament. The United States did not finish first- or second- or third- or even fourth. Teams representing Japan, Cuba, South Korea, and the Dominican Republic took home the hardware. This seemed so unfair to us Americans, after all we are the home of Abner Doubleday, we invented the game, most of us have played it since we were children and we generally assume we play it the best. It was like a slap in the face. The baseball gods must have taken those two weeks off. The worst part of the tournament was one of the first round games. The United States team, stocked with major leaguers, was beaten by that baseball powerhouse Canada. Just how fair was that?

This parable of Jesus that we find in the Scripture lesson this morning seems to evoke more emotion than most. If we listen to it again, with fresh ears, we are bound to be puzzled, outraged, or even offended by it. Here is the story of a vineyard owner who hires workers at the beginning of the day, promising them a very fair wage. Later in the day he hires more workers, and later he hires still more. Finally, toward the end of the day, when the heat of the afternoon sun has passed and most of the backbreaking labor is finished, the vineyard owner hires even more workers. It is the end of the story that really sticks in our craw. When the workers line up to receive their pay, each of them finds the same amount of money in their envelopes. Did you hear that? The workers who were hired near sunset were paid the very same amount as those who labored in the hot sun all day long.

I ask you, what is it about this parable that seems to upset us so? Perhaps it is the story's ability to challenge our worldly assumptions. We tend to evaluate just about everything on merit. There is value in putting in the time, in hard work, we say. There is reward based on your position and your rank. We believe that those who work the longest and the hardest should get the most in return. We value fair play. We are always concerned with everyone getting his or her just desserts. We reduce life to a "you get what you deserve" mentality. We are all basically bookkeepers at heart, accountants who keep score of what we have done and how we measure up against the others.

The late Studs Terkel commented that the typical American attitude is, "I've got it made because I deserve it. And if you don't have it made, you don't deserve it." Then he said, "When things don't work that way, as has been the case for lots of Americans these days, a kind of meanness sets in." Perhaps things are more desperate and meaner these days than the America Terkel described. We are prone to be less compassionate toward those who receive things we believe they didn't earn. We stand among the complainers that are described at the end of this particular parable. We murmur, "But we have worked hard all along. We have sweat and sacrificed. We have been faithful even in difficult circumstances. Yet even the Johnny-come-latelys and the deadbeats seem to be rewarded just as we are. Certainly, we have been given what has been promised. But it seems as if the losers are treated equally as well. What

kind of a world is this God? What kind of a God are you, working this strange way? It just doesn't add up!"

Fairness is the highest ethical stance of many in our culture. Some people would even choose fairness over lavish love. It makes more sense. Children usually see fairness as the standard in measuring what they have against their friends or their siblings. All who are parents are familiar with the cry of outrage, "But that's not fair!" This may be accompanied by that other great ethical benchmark of children, "But all the other kids get to." Children seldom raise the issue of fairness when they are being favored. In fact, almost no one (adults included) raises the issue of fairness when they are favored or privileged.

The vineyard owner's response was, "Are you jealous because I am generous?" In the Greek this sentence is translated, "Is your eye evil because I am good?" The evil eye is the rational eye, the one that keeps score and determines winners and losers. The evil eye expects God to operate as we do, protecting the insiders while slamming the door on those who have not earned a place with the rest of us. It is this evil eye that the parable rails against. Such bookkeeping is a sin. There is no minimum balance below which the grace of God refuses to forgive. There is no debt so high that God will lower your credit rating. There is no worry over such things because honestly, all of us live in the red. All of us are eternally indebted to God.

When the Lord of the Vineyard finally loses his cool, he vents his anger not on the losers and the apparent "undeserving." No, he gets angry with the winners and those who feel they have earned their blessings. He is fed up not with the unacceptable outsiders and the do-nothings, but with those insiders who can't seem to accept the scope of the Lord's acceptance of others. It is interesting to note that Jesus' harshest words of condemnation are always for the insiders, people like us, those who presume to be living in the black with God. In the stories about the Kingdom of God, nobody ever got kicked out except those who thought they were already in. Remember the story of the Prodigal Son. The story ends with the no-good loser at the party while the good boy who always worried about keeping score is outside pouting about his father's grace.

Andrew Greeley writes that the Parable of the Vineyard Workers is not a lesson about labor-management relations. The parable is not about justice and fairness in human relationships. Rather he says, it is about God. Its message is that God is so generous and so loving that by human standards God would be judged crazy. This is a parable about the insanity of God's love.

God gave up accounting long ago. In the Christ event, God closed the ledger book forever. In Jesus, God gathered up all of our IOUs and nailed them to a cross. After that it appears that only the "winners" lose. Only the "losers" win. God has given up on accounting as we think of it, the old by the book philosophy. Now the only way to come to God's party is to let go of our faulty accounting and let God be as reckless and indiscreet with grace as God wants to be.

This is a hard lesson for us to learn. Deep in our hearts and our rational minds we desire for God to love us and to rule the world according to our evaluation of things. There is a story about a mother, who had raised a large number of children on her own. How did she do it? What guidelines could she offer to others in similar circumstances? The mother was asked, "Did you love all your children equally, making sure that you gave all of them exactly the same treatment?" The wise mother replied, "I loved all of them. I loved them greatly. But I never wanted to love them equally. I loved the one that was down until he got up. I loved the one who was weak until she was strong. I loved the one who was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one who was lost until she was found."

Like the love of that mother, God's grace goes beyond mere equality. Grace reaches out to love, not just fairly, but extravagantly.