**September 21, 2014 – 15th Sunday after Pentecost**

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I thought I might start today’s sermon by giving you a little insight into my sermon-writing process. Normally, I don’t start with a pre-conceived idea of what I want to say, but rather I try to let the text and the Holy Spirit do the talking. Normally. But this week, since our stewardship campaign is starting up in a couple of weeks, and since the Gospel this week involved money, I thought. “Bingo! Perfect text for a sermon on stewardship! Sermon written!”

The only problem is that the text didn’t want to cooperate with me. Sigh…

There are many ways of interpreting Biblical texts. Two broad categories of interpretation are called *exegesis* and *eisegesis*. Exegesis is a Greek word, naturally, since why would we use English when Greek does the job. It literally means to lead out of, and eisegesis is its antonym, and means to lead into. What this means as far as interpreting the Bible goes is that exegesis brings the meaning out of the text while eisegesis puts a meaning into the text.

In my seminary, I was taught that eisegesis is bad and somewhat intellectually dishonest. It takes a text, usually out of context, and makes it say whatever you want it to. Now, practically speaking, it’s virtually impossible NOT to bring our own bias to any text, and I will often give a possible meaning or translation to a word or sentence in order to make a point.

But many people use this technique, either consciously or unconsciously, to make the Bible fit their own political or social agenda. This is what is so dangerous about textual literalism – by looking at the Bible through only one lens, we lose all of the nuances brought to the text through context and language, or in other words, through exegesis.

So I could probably have smashed a stewardship interpretation into Matthew’s Gospel today, but it would have been at the expense of what it actually might be saying to us. And I love the Bible too much to do that to it, so stewardship will have to wait a bit.

Because our Gospel reading today wasn’t really about money. Oh sure, money is mentioned, and plays a large role, but more than that this text is about envy. Envy and generosity. Namely our envy and God’s generosity.

On the face of it, the workers who were hired first and who worked all day seem to have a legitimate beef. Why should the people who only worked one hour, and in the cool of the evening at that, get paid the same as those who slaved away during the heat of the day? It’s just not fair.

But the landowner is ready with a comeback. “Didn’t we have an agreement about how much you were going to get paid, and didn’t I honor that agreement? And don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me?” And then he says, “Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Except, that’s not quite what he says. The literal translation is, “Or is your eye evil because I am generous?”

In Matthew 6:22-23, Jesus also talks about our eyes. He says:

*The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness!*

If your eye is healthy (or literally, perfect), your whole body will be full of light, but if it’s unhealthy (or literally, evil), your whole body will be full of darkness. So, keeping that verse in mind, another way of putting the landowner’s question in today’s parable would be, “Or is your whole body full of darkness because I am generous?”

That sounds a heck of a lot worse than merely “envious!” But that is the effect that envy, and its even darker cousin, greed, has on us. It darkens our soul, sometimes to the point that we can’t even be thankful for what WE have received.

Those workers, the first ones hired, were in no way diminished by the wages paid to the workers who started later than they did. They got the full amount that they agreed upon when they were hired. And yet, they resented the landowner for paying the others the same as they had gotten. They resented him seeing people in need, and helping them out.

This all sounds sadly familiar. How often have we heard that poor people shouldn’t be given handouts, even when it doesn’t appreciably alter our own standard of living? Or our own state, along with several others, turning down the Medicaid expansion that would make sure that everyone has health insurance, even though it would cost those states very little.

A sizeable and very noisy, group of people resents the safety nets being offered to the very poor, and votes against them at every turn. Not because they, themselves, will somehow benefit, but just to deny the benefit going to someone else. It sounds like a whole body full of darkness to me.

And envy can rear its ugly head even closer to home. I, myself, have had to fight the specter of envy more than a few times. This was especially true when I was singing, because it was so competitive. I would even get jealous of people who were getting parts that I wasn’t the right voice type for. I had to consciously act as if I were happy for them, when inside I was seething. It wasn’t pretty, believe me.

Or even more recently, before I was called here at Grace, when my classmates all started getting jobs and posting humble brags on Facebook about them, I really had to work hard at being sincere about congratulating them. I hope I pulled it off, but I’m not sure I’m that good of an actor.

Absolutely no good comes from envy. It truly darkens our soul.

So now we come to the second thing that this text is about – generosity. In spite of giving it lip service as a good thing, I think we have a fundamental discomfort with, or maybe even a suspicion of, generosity. True generosity, that is without any strings attached or quid pro quos expected, is difficult to understand. Generosity, like Grace, is not measurable, accountable, or calculable. It just is.

The landowner in this story is a very generous person. He goes out early in the morning to hire day laborers, and offers them work at a fair day’s wage. These were not his regular workers, but people standing around hoping to pick up a job for the day, and he helps them out. But then he goes out four more times, even after he’s hired enough workers on the first pass, and takes on more workers just because no one else has hired them. He doesn’t really need their services, but he generously offers to hire them anyway.

One would think that he would have been well within his rights to prorate their salaries based on how long they had worked. Equal pay for equal work. But instead he pays all of the workers equally, a full day’s wages, regardless of when they started.

The text says they were all paid a denarius, which was definitely the minimum wage of the time and barely subsistence level earnings. So if the landowner had only paid them for the hours they worked, it would have been a pittance. But he didn’t pay them what they “deserved.” He paid them out of his generosity.

I’ve heard a number of interpretations of this parable, such as the first workers hired are the Jewish people and the latecomers are the Gentiles. Or the first ones are the first Christ believers and the latecomers are, well, the latecomers. And those may be valid interpretations.

But like the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke, with its seeming unfair treatment of the two sons, I think this parable is also speaking to the fact that we are all, every one of us, undeserving of God’s grace and loving-kindness, and yet we receive it with abundance no matter what we do or who we are.

Because at the end of the day, no matter what we’ve done, we are all equal in God’s eyes, and he is equally generous to us. We can’t earn God’s grace. We can’t work hard enough to deserve God’s love. We can only accept it when it is offered to us, with humble and grateful hearts.

Amen.