

## Septuagesima, A ✠ D 2011

### Matthew 20:1-6

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 If the Gospel doesn't offend you, you're not hearing it correctly. Christianity is not sensible. Don't believe preachers who reduce it to easy maxims and sensible morals; that's not the Gospel. Be wary of your natural inclination to make everything make sense and fit into easy-to-define categories; that won't lead you to the Truth, but away from Him. Apologetics won't lead you to faith, even if it may remove obstacles and soften ears and hearts to hearing the Word. Logic and rhetoric are worthwhile, but if given priority over Holy Scripture, they will force you to reinterpret the clear, simple Word of God. No matter how you may try to avoid it, at the center of Christianity remains an object of gross offense: the cross. The cross is antithetical to how your brain is programmed to think.

2 The fall into sin has left man's thinking so broken and sinful that your natural inclinations are usually not right. Think of the joy that you feel when another person suffers misfortune. Why are stories about celebrities' addictions and embarrassments the most read news stories? The Germans have a word for this: Schadenfreude, joy at another's misfortune. It's Schadenfreude that drives most gossip. "Did you hear what happened to..." or even the more pious "we should pray for her did you hear?" is usually driven by a certain smug satisfaction that such misfortune has not happened to you. Schadenfreude is that twinge of satisfaction when you hear how the rich have become corrupt, or your neighbor's kid got a speeding ticket.

3 The photographic negative of Schadenfreude, joy at another's misfortune, is envy, despair over another's good fortune. When you grumble and complain about the man who has more than you because he doesn't seem to work as hard as you, this is envy. When success or promotion comes to another and you bristle and imagine yourself to be so much more deserving, this is envy. Envy and covetousness are closely related, desiring that which God has not given you but has given to your neighbor. When you look with envy at the blessings God has bestowed on others, or when you secretly rejoice when misfortune has befallen someone whom you previously envied, both emotions reveal an underlying selfish idolatry. No one is as important in your world as you are. Woe to us.

4 Repent. This is not how Christians ought to think. Rather, St. Paul exhorts those who belong to the Body of Christ to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep. Has misfortune happened to a friend, neighbor, or member of the community—yes, even if the misfortune is deserved—you are to weep with them. Has God blessed someone with more money, more children, more earthly treasures, more peace than He has given you? Rejoice with them; be jubilant for the blessings bestowed on them. These are genuine Christian responses. And yet, they are so foreign to our thinking, so impossible to do, and certainly not our first reactions.

5 So the workers in the parable who arrived first were envious of those who arrived later. It's not that they were treated unfairly. They agreed to work for a denarius, which was a fair day's wage. They worked hard and received their wages. But when even those who arrived last, showing up for the last hour of the shift, barely registering any work for the day, received a full day's wage, the first shift guys were no little bit upset. They weren't mad that they were treated unfairly; they were mad that the master of the vineyard was generous, and that others were placed on an equal footing with them. Their reaction is no different from yours: "Why doesn't God bless someone who's more deserving, someone like me?"

6 So it is with God. He's not interested in fairness. Fair belongs to a different kingdom. The Kingdom of Hell is the kingdom of fairness. You know what a fair wage would be. The wages of sin is death. Want what's fair? Sure, you can have it. The due penalty for your sin is eternal separation from God. The fair result for all your envy and Schadenfreude, for all your self-centered idolatry, is to let you answer for your own sins. Hell is filled with people who insisted on fairness.

7 But God is not fair. He is merciful. He is not an egalitarian. He is generous. The Lord, the Manager of the vineyard isn't about fairness anymore than He's about managing the vineyard in a cost-effective manner. It's poor management by our standards, to be sure, to give to each worker an undeserved denarius. And fairness simply isn't what the Master wants to give. Consider the One worker in the vineyard who worked perfectly and tirelessly. He withstood every temptation. He never considered His own best interests. He endured the treacherous toil, the back-breaking work of carrying the cross, the scorching sun that beat down on Him while He hung dying on the cross, the parching thirst from the cross. The One faithful worker is Jesus Christ. But for all His faithfulness, He received your wages: everlasting death and condemnation. The wages of your sin is the death of Jesus. Because He has borne your sin, worked tirelessly until death to atone for your sin, and risen victorious over the grave, the free gift for you is eternal life. Because He the First became the last, you the last have become the first. No, it's not fair.

8 That's how it is in the Master's vineyard: not fair. Do you begrudge this generosity, that the Lord would give to you what cannot be earned? No, it's not fair. The wage is too high. There's no merit in the vineyard, only grace. And while you're here, you're free to work, free to labor in the Lord's vineyard where the wage is guaranteed no matter the effort.

9 Mercy and merit are opposites; forgiveness and fairness are at odds with one another. You have received mercy; you have been forgiven. The beauty of the Gospel is that God is generous, not fair. He lets rain fall on the righteous and the wicked; He gives daily bread to everyone, even to all evil people, those who do not belong to Him. God does not treat everyone equally; He treats you individually, as a beloved child of God, born anew in the waters of Holy Baptism, adopted by Him uniquely as His own. He treats you as a treasured member of the Body of Christ, a precious one of His elect. He loves you uniquely, as a part of His whole Church. And here He feeds you, even you, gives the precious Body and Blood of Jesus to you, specifically, uniquely you. He meets you where you are and keeps you in His forgiveness and mercy every day. It doesn't make an ounce of sense, that God would love someone like you, that He would give His Son to die for someone like you, that He would continue to preserve you, to feed you, throughout your Christian life, but He does. That's the beautiful unfairness of the Gospel.

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