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“You too go into my vineyard” (Matt 20:4).

Twenty-Fifth Sunday of the Year

Isa 55:6-9; Ps 145; Phil 1:20c-24; 27a; Matt 20:1-16a

Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers is directed to his disciples, so it is an instruction for insiders. Its message addresses a tension in the community about inclusion as well as God’s mercy. Jesus’ disciples may have felt like the first workers in the parable, that they had signed on early and worked harder than all the latecomers and sinners Jesus was spending so much time with. The secondary audience for this parable, the Jewish converts in Matthew’s community, may have felt the same way about the Gentile converts being added to the church without having kept the Law.

Jesus’ parable effectively surfaces this resentment and challenges the early disciples to accept the latecomers. The biblical image of a vineyard was a paradise for desert people, and to be included in this bountiful garden was itself the prize and a source of joy for anyone invited to join. That some had been blessed to live and labor their whole lives there was a privilege and a blessing. Why should they complain that God wanted to expand the invitation to latecomers and outsiders who also had been searching for life but not yet been welcomed?

There are many ways to interpret this parable, but it does not translate easily into a lesson about hourly workers and wages in our capitalist meritocracy. The urge to

say, "Not fair!" overwhelms all other messages. But since the story stirs up such feelings, new audiences can still feel the challenge Jesus intended.

We may feel we have worked harder than others and should get merit pay or special credit. The question may come down to what God sees as the hardest work of all in the Vineyard of the Lord. Passing judgment on others comes automatically.

Calculating our own worthiness is a reassuring pastime. But what of the hard work of tolerance and suspended judgment, encouraging repeat offenders, helping those who make poor choices, weakened by addictions or trauma? The moral haves and have nots do not mix easily in this world, but God still wants everyone to be saved. Divine love is always given generously, but it will take human tolerance, patience and love for one another to complete God's Beloved Community.

Our family was blessed with an Auntie Bea, perhaps the quintessential Aunt Bea, who lived to be 102 and gathered around her a whole world of people who always felt loved and accepted. Her secret was being a good listener who never passed judgement. If a proposed path was possible, she blessed it. If it seemed doubtful, she said with a smile, "Let's see how that works out." Everyone knew she loved them and would be there for them, as many times as it took for them to find their own path. It made her a fruitful vineyard and an image of the generous landowner we all pray to meet when we approach Jesus, the foreman, to receive a share in his life.

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