

Just our Luck  
Sermon on the workers in the vineyard  
Matthew 20:1-16  
Rev. Becca Stevens  
September 21, 2008

Moses, my son, and I had only three dollars left walking through the Tennessee State Fair. When we passed by the fishing game a carnival hawker beckoned us over. He told us for only two dollars we could take a turn with his fishing pole and hook one of the hundred small paper sacks that held a small plastic toy or maybe, just maybe, hook the one that held a ticket for the large stuffed animal grand prize. Moses was excited and so I gave the Carney guy all but my last dollar. As he handed the pole to Moses he said, "Good luck". Knowing this was our one shot I bravely asked, "Where would that luck be?" He answered by whispering to Moses, "I would try the bottom left corner." Moses picked the bag he suggested and won the big prize. I couldn't believe it. He cheated for us. I was so happy and tipped him our dollar and said, "I can't believe it. No one has ever done that. That is so kind." It was not fair. He was completely generous and I still wonder how he can make a living if he is giving away the big prize.

The story of the workers in the vineyard is the story of life not being fair and God being even more generous than the sweet carnival man. The owner hires workers in the morning and pays them a fair day's wage. As the day progresses, he keeps returning to the market where people are still waiting for work, and keeps bringing them to the vineyard. The vineyard is where the community is working. It represents the Kingdom of God and life with God. At the end of the day, he pays them all a day's wage, regardless of how much time they actually spent in the field. It is not fair, but it is generous, especially if you are one of the late comers to the field. This Gospel is a Midrash, linked to several other stories about laborers in the fields, the hierarchy of the disciples, the reversal of fortune in the kingdom, and the economy of salvation. As the story unfolds though, it is clear that it is really about abandoning all measure of fairness and rank in the face of God's generosity. It helps to understand the story if we can remember that we are the laborers that have come to the field at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. The 11<sup>th</sup> hour is about an hour before sunset. It means the day is about over and that by all due respects, we have missed it. And still God offers us all the gifts given to everyone else. We are coming at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, not because we are lazy or carefree, but we have been anxious with worry and doubt in the market place. From the market place where people walk in circles trying to figure it out, working is a gift. The hardest thing is feeling like you are not given the opportunity to use your gifts in this world. The good news of the gospel is that no matter how lost we get, or distracted by the issues of our day, if we come to faith at all, all the gifts of God are for us. It speaks volumes about where justice ends and mercy and generosity pick up. The reversal of fortunes is attributed to the generosity and goodness of God, even for the most needy. Jesus like a generous landowner or carnival worker loves us generously. If let yourself feel all the scales of fairness and justice break and generosity flood your path, it is unbelievable. It makes it easy to offer it to everyone else in the world.

I went to Crieewood United Methodist Church last week and spoke about Magdalene and Thistle Farms with a woman named Gladys. Gladys was on the streets of Detroit for 40 years, well into what she felt like was the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. Her son in law was coming to Nashville, and she asked him for a ride. She knew no one, but made her way into Magdalene. If you met her today you would describe sunshine. She is beautiful and full of love and praise for all people. She talks about learning from her grandchildren all the things that she missed being stoned and how wonderful it is. She describes the wondrous feeling of working as a cleaner in the judges' chambers. As the judges leave in the evening she is coming in and they wave to her and thank her. She could be angry forever by all the wrongs done to her and guilty forever for all the wrongs she did to others. She could blame her childhood, her addiction, racism, the justice system and God for leaving her in the market place. Instead she cries when she talks about how God has given her more than she could ever imagine. She is a faithful worker in the field and makes me want to get out there again and start working.

Tomorrow 9 of us, Marlei, Marcus, Julie, Regina, Kay, Ali, Cindy, Katrina and Gwen are heading to the women's prison in Kentucky to launch our new book, written by the community of Magdalene with the help of many volunteers from St. Augustine's, called Finding Home. It is the story of finding the generosity and compassion of God in all the 11<sup>th</sup> hours of our lives. Gwen said that when she was behind bars that she could see only a sliver of life from the window in her cell and kept thinking, life has to be more than this. When I saw her yesterday she said she can't believe she is the one going to minister to women to remind them there is a way home.

Let this Gospel call you out of your 11<sup>th</sup> hour where you are feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, or oppressed by this world. It is not fair, but you can go to the vineyard, and receive every gift offered to everyone else in this whole world. God doesn't promise us fairness in the Gospel, he promises only two things. That your life will be rich, and you will live forever. There is not a better offer, so we can stop worrying about what we will eat or what we will wear, where the gas is coming from, or who is greater or lesser than us, just go to the vineyard and be about the work of God. "Where would I find all that?" I could have asked the carnival worker. I can hear him whisper, "Try the vineyard."