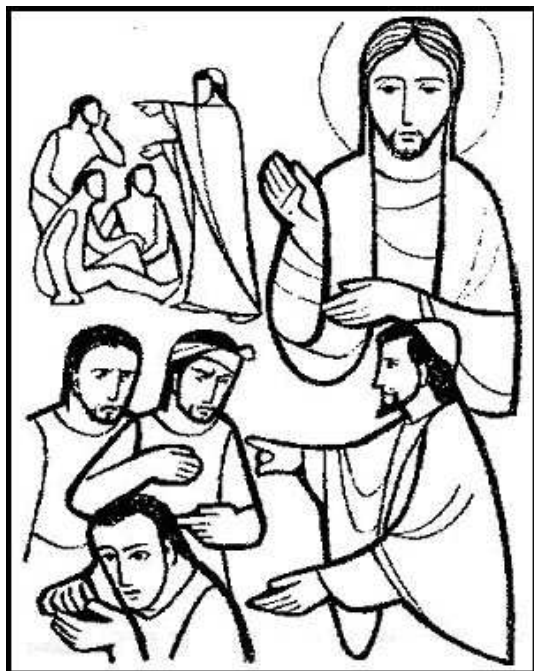


## “The Story Behind the Story”

Matthew 20:1-16 (Daily wages for the labourers)

Reflection Sept. 21/’08



A fellow finds himself in front of the heaven’s gates and wants to go in. But Peter explains that it’s not so easy to get into heaven, there are some criteria before entry is allowed. For example, have you been religious in life? Attend church? *Nope*. Hm, that's bad. Have you been generous? Gave money to the poor? Charities? *Nope*. Hmm, it’s getting worse. Have you done *any* good deeds? Helped your neighbour? Anything at all? *Nope*. Look, Peter says exasperated, everybody does something nice *sometime*. Work with me here, I'm trying to help. Now think!

The man thinks and says, "Well, there was this old lady. I came out of a store and found her surrounded by a dozen Hell's Angels. They had taken her purse and were shoving her around, taunting and abusing her. I got so mad I threw

my bags down, fought my way through the crowd, got her purse back and helped her to her feet. I then went up to the biggest, baddest biker and told him how despicable, cowardly and mean he was and spat right in his face"!

"Wow", says Peter, "That's impressive. But it’s not in my book here, when did *that* happen?"

"Oh," replies the man, "about 10 minutes ago".

This was a joke I came across some time ago, and for some reason it popped up with me when I was preparing this reflection, I guess because it’s funny - obviously.

So I wondered what makes a good joke? Jokes need a subtext to be funny. What is a subtext? It’s the story behind the story. The person telling the joke knows we all share certain ideas and notions, and the joke plays with those ideas.

In this joke of course the idea behind it is that you have to stand up for the weak and poor, that you have to speak out and act if injustice is committed, regardless of the consequences. That’s the idea we take for granted, that’s the *subtext*.

But the *other* idea underneath this joke is that heaven is a place for rewards, and hell is a place for cursing. In other words: afterlife is about reward and punishment. And that God is someone who keeps records of our good deeds and our bad deeds, and has some form of system to keep track of all we do. (Kind of like Santa Claus if you think about it.) After all, when a beloved person passes away, we just know that she or he will go to heaven. And if despicable person dies, say a war criminal or a drug dealer or a wife

beater, we cannot imagine that person going to heaven. He goes straight to hell, right? So: heaven is a place where you have to *earn* your spot.

When Jesus told this parable, he was addressing the beliefs the people didn't even realize they had, the beliefs they took for granted. Now we ought to think about *why* he said this, think of what had happened up to this point; so let's go back in Matthew's gospel a bit first:

Remember what happened immediately before this story? Peter came up to Jesus and asked him: Lord, we've given up everything for following you: our jobs, our homes, our money, even our reputation, and we got nothing for it. What rewards will we get for following you? What's in it for us?

And before that, there had been a dispute when Peter again had said: Lord, when somebody commits a sins against us, how many time should we forgive them? I know we should forgive them, but where do we draw the line, give us a hard number.

And before that, there was the rich young man who came up to Jesus asking: "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" In other words, how do I buy salvation? What do I have to do to earn my way into heaven? Name me your price, and I'll take care of it. I had the privilege of exploring that passage with you earlier this summer.

And even before that, Jesus had been teaching in the open and the children had gathered around him and the disciples shooed them away. Now this was not the heartless act we sometimes make it out to be; because these were not the cute, sweet well-groomed huggable kids we usually see in Sundayschool illustrations. These were dirty little street brats, kids left to their own devices after their parents had died. Beggar kids in rags and with open sores, pick-pockets, sometimes even child prostitutes. So *of course* the disciples wanted to get rid of these little pests. *I* would have wanted to get rif of them! But Jesus had said: wait a minute, these kids are what the kingdom of heaven are all about. Filthy pests are welcome there.

Can you see the common theme running through all these incidents? It's all about reward and punishment. It's about who deserves the right to be let close to God.

Basically, it's about people wanting to know: who is in – and who is out; and how do you earn your way in; and Jesus consistently upsetting our expectations and assumptions

Clearly, Jesus has different ideas about heaven, and to illustrate them he tells a parable about a situation that his listeners are all very familiar with: the harvesting of grapes. People left the grapes on the vines until the end of September, early October when the rainy season started. Now it was a fine balance: you wanted to leave the grapes on the vine as long as possible; the longer they stayed on the vine, the more sugar the leaves produced, the sweeter and tastier the grapes got. But once the rains started and your crop was still on the vine: the entire crop would be lost, and with it your year's income. So here's a vintner and he figures the rains will start any time now so he decides: now is the time to pick the grapes. So he goes to the market place at 6:00 a.m. and he employs what he thinks are enough labourers to take his crop in on time. But by 9 a.m. he realizes things are not going as fast as he expected so he goes back to the market and

employs a few more people. Same thing at mid-day and at 3 p.m. Then at 5 p.m. (the 11<sup>th</sup> hour) he realizes there are still quite a few grapes on the vine, and they're not going to make it that day. He knows it will rain soon, and if he makes a mistake he will lose that last bit of his crop. So he goes down once more and employs a few people for just 1 more hour, just long enough to get the entire crop in on time.

Then, at the end of the day, the workers get paid. The men who worked for 1 hour only receive a full day's wages. Of course the men who have toiled and sweated the whole day long see that, and they fully expect to be paid *more*. And they're absolutely right: they *do* deserve more.

Jesus is well aware of this, of course, so he uses this assumption to illustrate his teaching. And what *is* the assumption here, the story underneath this story? Is it that you can earn your way into God's kingdom by doing the right things? No, says Jesus here, that's not what it's about. God does not make a business deal with us, there's no positive or negative balance when we die. The kingdom of God is not a business arrangement where we get acknowledged for services rendered. The Kingdom of God is much more like a family, where everybody contributes as they are able, and everybody shares the rewards equally.

Now the surprising thing, I think, is not so much that Jesus would say that, but rather that the disciples who had been with him for so long still did not understand the message that Jesus had been teaching all those years. Of course it's not just the disciples for whom it took so long for the dime to drop. Three weeks ago the U.S. commemorated the horrific attack of Sept. 11, and there are still sincere Christians who will tell you that God made that happen because of the "sinful, decadent ways of American society". Other Christians told us in the late '80s that AIDS was God's way of punishing gay people. And on a smaller scale: I'm sure many of us, including myself, have been in a desperate situation at some moment in our lives and before you knew it, a prayer would slip out: o dear God, if you help me out of this one I promise I will always go to church, never swear again, never drink again, or whatever the promise was.

Can you spot the underlying assumptions here?

1) Apparently we think that the God of mercy has limits to his mercy and makes horrible things happen when he feels like it. And 2) that we can or should win God's favour by being "good" (depending on how *we* define "good") and by not doing things *we* think God disapproves of.

We can of course look at Jesus' disciples and think "wow, are these guys slow or *what?*" And we can of course look at some Christians who seem to have a very narrow black & white view on what exactly is a Christian life style and what is not. But that's not what this story is about, either.

What this story invites us to do is to look at our own ideas that we take for granted – our own subtext. We should always ask ourselves: What do I believe about God? I'm not

talking about the official church creed here, I'm talking about our silent assumptions about the nature of God. Do I see God as a punishing God, who grants eternal life to "good Christians" while keeping non-Christians out? Or: do I dare to believe that God accepts and loves... *everybody*? Including those who clearly don't deserve so? It's a tough one...

And here's the kicker: do I dare to believe that God accepts and loves... even me?  
Amen.