

Matthean Mathematics

This sermon was preached at Sts. Peter and Paul on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 24th, 2017. The texts were Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16.

“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you did not receive it?” (I Corinthians 4:7)

*Like sun that shines the same on every face,
both vineyard and the work, the owner’s gift.
We learn at end of day it’s all of grace.*

*Upon the earth each person has their place
as surely as each star its nightly shift,
and sunlight falls the same on every face.*

*By mercy we’re all winners of the race;
by mercy every lowly gets a lift:
by mercy do we learn it’s all of grace.*

*God’s vineyard spans the globe; there’s lots of space
for all who hear God’s call to heal its rifts
like sunlight chasing pain from every face.*

*Let none begrudge the width of God’s embrace
which reaches from the safe to those adrift.
We learn at end of day it’s all of grace.*

*Until our human love can keep apace
with God’s, may labour be a sharing of the gift
that shines like sun the same on every face.
At end of day, we praise: it’s all of grace.*

—by lectionary poet Andrew King

Welcome again to the strange new world of mathematics according to Jesus in Matthew.

From the very first lesson in this new math we’ve learned that those whom we considered to be number one have had to go to the back of the line: “...the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In this new math small things are given great worth. Small people are given great attention. And the mathematics of Professor Archimedes is at last turned on its head.

Illustration 1: If you leave ninety-nine sheep alone, open to attack in the Palestinian wilderness, when you return with that one lost sheep you're going to be coming back to far fewer sheep than you left in that wilderness.

Illustration 2: I'm thinking of that woman who took nearly a quart—yes, an entire quart—of the finest perfume, costing her over a year's wages, and just poured it all over Jesus' feet, anointing him for burial. Jesus praises the woman for her wastefulness.

Illustration 3: Another day, Jesus watched the big rich people making a big show of dropping their big bags of money into the temple treasury; but when Jesus sees a poor widow come in, who drops one little penny into the offering plate, he claims that she's given so much more than all the big rich people put together. Jesus says that she's given her entire self.

Here's the new math according to Jesus. I suppose you're either the sort of student who really digs this new math, or you're the sort of student who absolutely hates this new math according to Jesus.

"...The last will be first, and the first will be last."

If you're last, you love the new math.

If you're first, I'm thinking that you hate the new math.

So, here's *Illustration 4:* There once was this farmer who hired day-laborers to go and work in his vineyard. Some went to work at the crack of dawn and didn't quit til dusk. Others came during the morning coffee break. Some arrived during the lunch hour, and others came during afternoon coffee. Finally, because nobody else had hired them (who knows why?), some showed up just an hour before it was time to quit. Now, according to your math, who gets paid more?

Well, when the sun had gone down, this very determined farmer called everybody together, first paying those who came last, and then paying everybody else. Yes, I said, then paying everybody else the very same daily wage whether they worked for an hour or they worked the entire day.

Now don't look at me that way! I didn't tell the story!

Go figure. *One hour* of work is worth one denarius, and *twelve hours* of work is worth one denarius. Welcome to the new math according to Jesus! Like I said, you either love this math, or you hate this math. And I suppose that most of us really hate this sort of math, identifying with the day-laborers who have "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat..." We feel sorry for them because, well, nobody works longer hours than we do! So, we surely deserve to get paid a whole lot more than anyone else! We deserve it! Except that we did get paid what we were promised. It's just that everybody else also got paid what we were promised.

"Every time I read this story, it's unfair all over again," says Ted in the Agnus Day cartoon strip.

"The reign of God isn't fair," explains the other character, "the reign of God is merciful."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" asks Ted.

"It all depends," comes the answer, "on whether you need mercy or not."

If you don't need mercy, then this story is going to be a big problem for you; in fact, the Christian faith is going to be a big problem for you, because the Christian faith is all about God's mercy for us who cannot do for ourselves what only God can do for us. So, there are only two kinds of days, "The ones when we know we need Jesus, and the ones when we're really messed up."

Look, Jesus seems to be the kind of guy who wants everyone to have enough. If the workers who were hired at the end of the day only received one-twelfth of a day's wage—one-twelfth of a denarius—their families would starve. That's not what Jesus wants. I hope that's not what we

want for the sake of fairness! People go without because they didn't work as hard as we did.

Remember, this is the same Jesus who told a rich man to sell everything; who directed party hosts to invite those who would not be able to invite them in return; who spoke of lenders canceling massive financial debts; who included untouchable people among his closest friends; who visited the despised toll-collector Zaccheus, leaving him so bowled over that he gave his hard-earned money back with interest to those he had earned it from.

Of course, the most interesting character in the story isn't any one of the laborers. It isn't any one of us with our prideful, envious self-righteousness. The most interesting character is the boss of the vineyard with his expansive actions, the landowner who refuses to rest until everyone in town is gainfully employed, and until everyone in town has enough to care for his family.

The real scandal of the parable is that the boss, through his relentless determination, has made others, dare I say it, **“equal to us.”**

“These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (Matthew 20:12).

It's scandalous, we think, except that *we are not the ones* “who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.” Look how late in the day we have come to the vineyard. I count almost four thousand years since Abraham and Sarah were called forth from Aram, but we get the same pay.

Paul asks the question, better than I, in First Corinthians, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you did not receive it?” (I Corinthians 4:7)

When we forget, or refuse to remember, that all we have is a gift, “Like sun that shines the same on every face,” we can so easily become resentful of God's generosity to others. We can so easily care more about fairness than we do about mercy.

So the owner replies to our grumbling, “Don't I have the right to seek out and save whom I choose? Are you envious because my hiring practices are so generous?”

Some remember the Sunday when Clarence Jordan preached at a large, wealthy church in Atlanta. After the service, the pastor of the church asked Jordan for some advice. The church custodian had eight children and earned a mere \$80 bucks per week from that big church. The concerned pastor claimed that he had tried to get a raise for the custodian from the parish council but with no success.

Jordan considered the situation for a moment and then quipped, “Well, why don't you just swap salaries with the custodian? That way, it wouldn't require any extra money in the parish budget.”

No matter how much we have, there is always the lingering fear that it won't be enough. God may not give us what we deserve. Indeed, God may give us something quite different from what we think we deserve. God may give us grace and mercy. God may give us equality with one another. In the end, we may receive a whole lot more than what we deserve. And that would be enough for everyone.

In the strange new math of the gospel, just that sip of wine, just that little bit of bread, in the presence of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is enough to feed us and everyone else forever. Really more than we deserve.