

After the Sermon Hymn: *Stepping down to the congregation:*

Matt 20: 1-16     **“God’s Justice vs. Human Justice”** (09/18/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

God’s peace with you!

I always wanted to preach about this text. It is a wonderful challenging text piece! The last time I heard another minister preaching about this text was last year in DC. I will never forget how he began his sermon, saying: “You certainly cannot take this text literally! ... “In this moment he had already lost me. And for the rest of his sermon I thought how I would make it more exciting and challenging for all of us. Let us see, how we can meet in this text Jesus’ will for us, and a vision for our lives.

Let us read together aloud in unison from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 20, the verses 1 to 16. Afterwards, I would be curious to hear what your first, spontaneous thoughts are about this story.

### ***The Labourers in the Vineyard***

*‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the*

laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.  
<sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" <sup>7</sup>They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first."  
<sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, "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." <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first and the first will be last.'

AMEN.

Now I am curious, what you think: Is this the call for communism and that we all shall get the same amount of money for our work?

...

It is wise to first to look at the context. A text piece is otherwise, through isolation in danger of being manipulated.

In the verses before (19: 27) Peter asks Jesus: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus comforts his disciples: God will reward them "hundredfold", inclusive eternal life." God is just, so to speak!

Matthew knows this passage already from Mark. But Matthew adds a contradictory point: We cannot understand God from the point of justice; If God would we really just none of us could live with it!

When Matthew wrote his gospel he already had on hand Mark's three Jesus announcements of his own suffering (Mk 8-10). But in the version of Mark, Jesus agrees to his suffering and death – this agreement serves in Mark Jesus' glorification as "king Israel's".

The concept of justice OR mercy is not Mark – this is Matthew! Like drumbeats this comparison, even better: CONFRONTATION pervades the whole Matthew gospel; just think about the Sermon on the Mount! But nowhere the situation is so dramatic like here – it is a struggle of life or death, the last act of Jesus' passion (Matt 16-20). The parable of the laborers in the vineyard holds Jesus' core program

– as seen through the eyes of Matthew.

You might think now: Why on earth must the talking about Jesus happen always in extremes? Why cannot everything about Jesus be said milder, more tolerant, more willing to compromise? Apparently not – at least not in Jesus terms.

The word “justice” seems for us today the epitome [e-pí-t<sup>e</sup>-mi] of the humane; and it is without any doubt one of the most valuable values we have and follow. “Justice’ means balancing. It seems that we have adopted this longing for balance from the physics. The mechanism of physics balance since billions of year’s contrary powers. All movement and energy in the world pushes towards equalization. It is this simple law of blast and counterblast, which we have adopted into our social psychology: Whoever hurts the values we agree on in our society, we ask for punishment.

This has been for sure a cultural historical progress compared to the days before, where the fist law ruled the law of the jungle. Where the fist law rules, there is always the danger, that we react in individual pain disproportional and excessively. In our days we request that we all get judged and sentenced with the same measurement. Two thousand years BEFORE Christ we find this request first time in Mesopotamia written: that the punishment should be equal to the guilt. “The same measurement” – this is ‘justice”. With this change the individual fist law was replaced through public authorities.

We don't need to be very sophisticated to acknowledge that 4,000 years after the implementation of this social rule we are still not at its fulfillment; we still struggle with racism or sexism, not to think about the injustice that we keep the Developing countries in very conscious dependency, to have cheap access to natural resources.

Look at the social and civil movements in the Arabic countries, but also the manifold NGO- and church work in our country and the societies around the world: We witness fascinated in the moment the globalization of exactly this justice-idea!

All the more we hesitate to say good-bye to it! And this is exactly what Jesus asks us: To go even beyond the justice-thinking we still believe in! How much was this man of Nazareth ahead of his time that he was able to give us a vision, which would be still one for us, who we live 2000 years later here at the gate to NY with its Wall Street?

Again: What is justice? What is its limitation? Yes, the claims of one person to the other get enforced. But have we become therewith more human, more social or peaceful? Isn't justice only a smokescreen for any kind of dogmatism, of bossiness? Even justice has been fulfilled – doesn't remain as basis simply the egoism of all?

Who benefits in fact from justice? The unprotected we would think. --- And the poor. ---And the needy. But is this really the case? If we start thinking about out it a little bit we need to confess: not really! The rich

can afford so many lawyers that you can have thousand times right – but you might never get it ... or so late, that it is too late! Just think about those fishers, who needed to fight Exxon, who refused to fulfill its financial promises after the accident of the Exxon Valdez? ... A friend of mine just got arrested in DC protesting the above ground pipeline Obama obviously wants to build from Canada through pretty much our whole country. Arrested in the police car she ended up sitting near to Mari Castellanos, one of our UCC-representatives on Capitol Hill, who had also been among the protesters. Who do you think has more of a chance to win – the oil industry or the few activists, who struggle often themselves for their own financial survival?

Jesus protests a justice, which remains only formally just, but is not interested in the people with their real needs and feelings. Justice remains externally by asking for only the facts, asking only for what can be proofed in court. Jesus is interested in what the people REALLY need, WHOM they need and WHAT they need to exist. THIS is the reason, why Jesus risked his live and went to the outermost [au-termost] to gather the outcast, the people out-of-bounds.

Jesus formulated a new demand, a new claim: for mercy, empathy and compassion!

Jesus asks for real understanding and accompanying without judgment. When you look at this flip chart in front of me, you see that

the parents of our Pre-Confirmation-Class in their meeting last Monday ask for the same; Church should be: Open and inviting, Non-judgmental, focused on the person, teaching mercy, understanding, God-oriented. What our parents request for the church, Jesus requests for the whole human society.

When we had this Wednesday night at Leigh's house a meeting with the chairs of Mission, Social Responsibility, Christian Education and the Elders to talk about how to become a Global Mission church, we developed a vision for our church exactly in this spirit of Jesus: To open up to the real needs of us humans – locally and globally!

Jesus' advocating for the tax collectors, sinners and prostitutes was for Matthew Jesus own death sentence. Jesus gets accused to turn everything - the order of his society upside down. It is not a misunderstanding, it is Jesus' program: **"The last will be first."** It is a promise for everyone in need. But the second part of the sentence, **"the first will be last"** is threatening to all of those, who think they are on the safe side of life, by belonging to the wealth, or already the middle class. And CERTAINLY they would lose a lot, if they were forced to share their wealth [for example through higher taxes] with those in the world, who starve.

The secured say: *"We have worked hard for it. This is mine - we earned it. Nobody is allowed to take it away from me."* And the media follow this propaganda. Their combined message to us all is: "Do the

same! Work hard! Invest capital! We need jobs and economical growth” They usually forget to add that in most cases the rich were already born into these wealthy circumstances and that most people in poverty simply don’t have the educational, financial and social support resources – here as well as in developing countries.

“The last will be first!” This is the uprising of the gutter. This is anarchy. This is revolution.

Whoever understands the unbelievable benignity of this Jesus of Nazareth, will understand the defense and hate Jesus caused and faced. Whoever asks in faith today for the same, faces the same resistance and hate as Jesus did two thousand years ago. Jesus must have been able to calculate the risk, when he moved up on Palm Sunday to Jerusalem with his excluded friends. This would be as if we would walk to Wall Street asking for mercy for the victims of their finance haggling all over the world. Except that we would not risk our lives, but might end up only in police records.

A last thought:

The owner of the vineyard needed laborers to pick the grapes, before they would wither in the blazing sun. Each hour he hires workers, promising each of them a daily wage of one denarius [di-nae-rius]. One denarius [di-nae-rius] in those days had the value and buying power as it is our days still paid in developing countries for a 14

hours' work day. A day laborer could buy from his daily wage maybe as much as to live with his wife and his 2 to 5 children for one day: some pita breads, a melon, some cucumbers or figs. This had to be enough until the next morning. With the Morning Prayer the family would ask again "Give us today our daily bread ..."

I assume that we all believe in a market system and that performance should be awarded accordingly. But if the landowner would have paid according to our measurements and what WE think would have been just, and paid only a 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> of a denarius for the later ones – they would have not been able to feed in the night themselves and their family – nobody can get filled by half of pita bread! ...

For me Jesus parable encourages us Christians in 2011 therefore to fight for a minimum wage for employees in all branches – as you followed with my salary the compensation guidelines of our NY Conference. Markets need to be domesticated!

But Jesus asks us for much more: If you want to understand what your own life is about, then you need to start making mercy and benignity the beginning of everything! ---- Everything.

**AMEN!**