

September 20, 2020
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 20:1-16
“N.V.”

Not all sermons have three parts. This one has five - let's call them chapters.

Chapter One - “Paggles”
Chapter Two - “*In medias res*”
Chapter Three - “Parables”
Chapter Four - “All the Damp Day”
Chapter Five - “So . . . ?”

Chapter One - “Paggles”

It was as a graduate student in New Orleans that I learned the seven deadly sins. Or, I learned which of my twenty-seven sins were deadly, the names of them. It was in a course on Southern Literature at Tulane University. Dr. Rocks, wrote the title of this chapter on the board, “Paggles. P A G G L E S. Pride, anger, greed, gluttony, lust, envy and sloth. And the saddest of these is . . . ? It is Envy. We can swell with Pride, our Anger can be righteous. Gluttony's first bite tastes good on our tongue; Greed's first dime feels good in our pocket; and at the beginning of Sloth is rest. But Envy just sticks in our craw; it is bitter from beginning to end.

Chapter Two - “In Medias Res”

Fairy tales may begin “Once upon a time” They also tend to begin in the middle. What do we know, for example, about Snow White before the wicked queen comes onto the scene or about any of those stories that features three brothers, the youngest of which is forced to go out to seek his fortune? What do we know about Cinderella – the early years?

Here is how “Cinderella” begins (in the Brothers Grimm's version)—do you remember any of this? I didn't.

A rich man's wife became sick, and when she felt that her end was drawing near, she called her only daughter to her bedside and said, “Dear child, remain pious and good, and then our dear God will always protect you, and I will look down on you from heaven and be near you.” With this she closed her eyes and died.

The girl went out to her mother's grave every day and wept, and she remained pious and good. When winter came the snow spread a white cloth over the grave, and when the spring sun had removed it again, the man took himself another wife.

And this wife, as we know from Walt Disney's retelling, brings two daughters into the house with her. The Brothers Grimm describe them as “beautiful, with fair faces but evil and dark

hearts.” But in the Disney cartoon, for our edification *and* enjoyment, they wear those dark hearts on their ugly sleeves,

And soon they have condemned their lovely, good, pious stepsister to the kitchen; they take away her bed, so that she has to sleep by the hearth in the ashes. Then, because she looks always dusty and dirty, they called her Cinderella.

Poor child! Sad! So, why do these stories—fairy stories like Cinderella—appeal to us?

Is it because they are wise? I’m not sure I see the wisdom in “Cinderella.” *Or*, is it because they are fair, at least in this sense: the oppressed gets and the oppressor gets it? I think so. We identify in these stories with Snow White, with the put-upon younger brother, and with Cinderella, because they are being treated unfairly, and then the unfairness is turned upside down. In this case, Cinderella *goes* to the ball (bibbity-bobbity-boo). The prince falls in love with her, and when *she* falls again, at midnight, back into the ashes, he will come looking for her, and he will find her, and the poor, good, misused child will live happily ever after, while—at least in the Disney version—the ugly sisters stay .

Chapter Three - “Parable”

But what does “Cinderella” have to do with the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard? Well, let’s ask: Who “plays” the role of Cinderella in Jesus’ parable? The last or the first? Surprisingly, if we’re asking about which characters in the story we identify with, it is those hired first. We identify with Cinderella - right? - because she is being treated unfairly! The world needs to be turned upside down, if she is to be rewarded as she should be.

We identify in the parable with the all-day workers because *they* are being treated unfairly, as we have been at times - overworked and underpaid.

Chapter Four - “ All the Damp Day”

But are these all-day workers “Cinderella” in the *story* itself? Let’s look at the parable again:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.” He actually hires them in *five* shifts with three “deals.” Pay attention: the first agree with him to a day’s pay for a day’s work. To the second, he promises “whatever is right.” To the third and the fourth (those he hires at the sixth and the ninth hours (noon and three o’clock), he makes the same promise: he’ll pay what is right. To the fifth—those that have been idle all day, even to five o’clock, the eleventh hour, he first asks a question, “Why are they still there? Why have they been idle *all day*?” “Because no one has hired them,” they respond. Then, he says to them only, “Then, go.” He makes no “deal,” no promises.

At this point the parable becomes concerned only with the first and last hired. The last are paid first—for the half-hour they have worked a day’s wage. (What the second, third, and fourth shifts are paid, incidentally, we don’t know. The parable doesn’t say.) But the last hired are paid first, a day’s wage. And the first hired are also paid . . . also a day’s wage.

We know very well what happens next, and we sympathize. These first are *bitterly* disappointed and they express their disappointment. They “grumble,” Jesus says. They complain, loudly!

Chapter Five - “So . . . ?”

But what do they complain about? Are they underpaid. Or do they complain about getting exactly what they’ve agreed upon—and that is a fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work. How can *that* be unfair?

But that isn’t what they’re complaining about really, is it? - that they have been treated unfairly. Rather they complain because others have been treated too well!

And if we find we sympathize with those complaining workers, then won’t we also find that we have been reading the parable from the point of view of Cinderella’s envious stepsisters? Don’t they treat her the way they do, because they are envious, and they are envious because at the end of the she is more fortunate than they are so more than she deserves. This is not to say that they are unfortunate, not at all! But she - damp it - she has a fairy Godmother. Dress her up, she is beautiful, and she will marry a prince. If the sisters are angry at the end of the story—and they are—it is not that they have been mistreated, not at all; it’s because their sister has done well. Even if they are no worse off than they were before, she is better off; and they can’t stand it.

So, are we those stepsisters? Or are we the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son? Are we the first-hired workers in today’s parable? Are we saying in our hearts, if it is not on our lips?: God forbid that anyone get more than his or her due if we don’t. Are we saying, “No, no. No! Everyone should get exactly what he or she deserves”?

Uh, oh! We mean, of course, everyone except ourselves. Don’t we? Except me, O Lord, please, don’t do with me as I deserve. Please!

Thank God that by his grace, God doesn’t treat *any* of us as we deserve but gives us far, far more—in his grace alone—than we can ever deserve, than we can imagine.

I wonder if maybe, “being perfect as God is perfect” - that most difficult of commandments . . . maybe it could mean being gracious as God is gracious. Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.