

Sunday, September 18, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Hey, That's Not Fair!”

Every year Parade Magazine publishes a special issue called, “What Do People Earn?”

The magazine, which is a supplement to many Sunday Newspapers, lists occupations and salaries.

The range goes from the secretary who makes \$18,000 a year to the teacher who makes \$50,000 to the Fed Ex pilot who makes \$148,000 to the President of the United States at \$400,000 and usually ends with Bill Gates or Warren Buffett who make more than everyone else put together.

I have never been quite sure what the purpose of this special issue is.

The list represents a continuum, and presents a reality that few of us can change.

I suppose that we should read it with an idea that there are those who, remarkably, get by on a fraction of what we might make, as well as those who earn more than we might ever dream of.

But I think the most common response to the “What People Earn” issue is the one we heard in today’s scripture lesson.

Actually from both lessons, we hear the common refrain, “Hey that’s not fair!”

The vineyard workers who were hired early in the morning probably started the day feeling lucky to have been chosen for work.

Their brothers who were left standing in the marketplace, were likely lamenting that another day would go by with no work.

Circumstances change.

By the end of the day, everyone had money in his pocket.

This would seem to be a reason for the community to celebrate.

However, some having worked more than others created cause for grumbling. “It is just not fair.”

The landowner admonishes them, “Did I not pay you what I promised?”

Well, yes.

Some things never change.

The Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, are upset with Moses and Aaron.

They are hungry.

They are whining about the conditions – lack of food, lack of comfort – they are asking, “Why exactly did we leave the predictability of slavery?”

God sends them food – perhaps not what they were dreaming of, but sustenance, nonetheless.

They have quickly forgotten that their freedom is what they should be celebrating, not their comfort.

Both scripture lessons today call us to a higher level of compassion than we might currently occupy.

Compassion means to endure, suffer, undergo or experience something with another person.

As I mentioned last week, we are starting a twelve-week series on becoming a compassionate community.

The very first rule – the foundation of the Charter for Compassion, written and promoted by Karen Armstrong, is to follow the Golden Rule:

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Step One is learning about compassion. The charter states:

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and put another there, and to honor the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

This is a tall order.

We routinely think of compassion as something we bestow on those less fortunate than ourselves.

The laborers in the vineyard should have been happy that everyone had work.

But what about those more fortunate?

What about our leaders?

If we commit to treating everybody with respect, that would have to include the beleaguered Moses and Aaron.

They are certainly doing the best that they can.

They believe that they are following God's call to lead this group of people to a more just place.

They can't necessarily help the circumstances. They need the support of their followers.

This is perhaps a bigger challenge than worrying about the poor and the hungry.

Though we often think about our leaders and are quite willing to lament their poor performance, we rarely think of them with compassion.

It is so easy to pass judgment from the sidelines.

It is not so easy to look with mercy, forgiveness and grace to those who have more power than we.

In "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" Karen Armstrong explores our evolution of caring for one another as a product of brain development.

She points out that our brains, and I would add our hearts have to be trained to overcome our self-protective tendencies.

Just as an athlete must train their body to compete, we are called to develop mental habits that are kinder, gentler and less fearful of others.

She says, "A person who is free of threat is calm, composed, cool, patient and collected.

She identifies historic events that point to a radical change in the way that communities treated one another. During the millennium before the time of Christ, sages, prophets and mystics began to overcome destructive impulses as they developed an interior life.

They started paying attention to thoughts and feelings. The use of stories, myths and parables were carefully crafted to help people understand issues of life and death.

Jesus is particularly well known for his use of parables to make a point. Today's reading about the laborers in the vineyard is one example.

In Armstrong's first chapter, she looks at the historical development of moral living.

She tells the story of the Buddha who observed that "While spite, hatred, envy and ingratitude shrink our horizons and limit our creativity, gratitude, compassion and altruism broaden our perspective and break down the barriers we erect between ourselves and others."

Confucius, writing in the sixth century before Christ, condemned the developing market economy that was causing people to "cast restraint to the winds in a headlong and aggressive pursuit of luxury, wealth and power." In arguing for compassion he said, "When people are

treated with reverence, they become conscious of their own sacred worth, and ordinary actions, such as eating and drinking, are lifted to a level higher than the biological and invested with holiness.”

The ancient rabbinic tradition pointed to the lessons of the Torah: “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man.”

Jesus reiterated this golden rule encouraging his followers to “love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus offered kindness and compassion to each person he encountered, with little expectation of a return.

Our world is changing just as dramatically as the world changed in the time of the Buddha, or Confucius or Jesus.

Armstrong identifies times of “spiritual upheaval” as those periods when old brain activities were being co-opted by new brain perspective.

I believe that we are in a period of spiritual upheaval right now.

Our idea of community has become increasingly individualized.

Our tendency for self-focus continues to be fed by an international sense of entitlement.

While technology has broadened our exposure to cultures and ideas far beyond our borders, our brains and hearts have not embraced those who are different as brothers and sisters.

We are isolating ourselves, working and living outside the bounds of community.

I had a startling example of this earlier in the week when my son, Andrew, sent me a copy of a paper he had written for his Expository Writing class at Villanova. He is a 19-year-old sophomore who writes:

“As I sit here in the second floor lounge of Good Counsel, I am contemplating why my attention is wandering everywhere in the room rather than on the blank word document sitting directly in front of me. The word document is presented on the 14 inch monitor of my Villanova issued Dell e3600, my 2006 video iPod is plugged into my ears cutting off the quiet of my mind that is usually filled with distracting thoughts, my iPhone 4 rests safely in my pocket on vibrate so I can feel if a new email pops into my inbox or if my friends send a text, providing me any excuse possible to procrastinate and push off the inevitable concentration that I will eventually have to endure. In another window I have Facebook set on the homepage so I can easily click out of my paper and see if I have any notifications or if anyone has posted an interesting status or comment. I have completely surrounded myself with technological distraction in order to create what my mind now considers a comfortable work environment to compose a paper. Excluding taste, my senses are completely tapped into the world of technology. I look around the lounge

and see that everyone has a similar set up. It's not just me it is everyone. The age of burying yourself in the library among stacks of books and academic journals in complete solitude the night before a big test or essay is dead.”

I would add to his observation that the idea of community well being has been lost.

In 2002, David Hollenbach, writing on The Common Good and Christian Ethics observed that church is one of the best places for people to learn the skills necessary for successfully navigating community. He suggested that church work, such as, going to meetings, taking part in making decisions, planning or chairing meetings, writing letters, giving presentations, visiting those who are sick, helping people in need, all foster a sense of larger community. You can't be on a committee of one!

My friends, we are all called to be laborers in Christ's vineyard. Some will work harder or get paid more.

Some will look alike, while others will speak another language and have a different skin color.

Each one of us will bring a talent, a gift to share.

The important thing to remember is that we are all interrelated-there is a fine thread that connects us all.

Armstrong reminds us that the sages, prophets and mystics of early days did not regard compassion as an impractical dream.

“They were innovative thinkers, ready to use whatever tools lay to hand in order to reorient the human mind, assuage suffering and pull their societies back from the brink.”

This is our calling. Jesus Christ set a standard for compassionate behavior that we have chosen to follow.

If we dare to call ourselves Christians, we must work tirelessly to live up to those standards.

I want to close with the words of Paul to the Ephesians – scripture chosen for this afternoon's Pastor Emeritus Service;

I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Amen.