



The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

September 18, 2011

## ***Grumbling and Grace***

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

***And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner.*** (*Matthew 20:12*)

What is it to grumble? We see this word a good number of times within both the Old and New Testaments—there are some forty related references. I tried to imagine what it sounded like in those days—to **GRUMBLE**—we don't usually call it grumbling, we call it other things like whining, complaining, talking under one's breath. And all of us at one time or another have either grumbled, or been the recipient of grumbling. If you are a parent, or in a position of leadership, you have most likely many times heard grumbling directed your way.

When I was Rector of Holy Trinity in Atlanta, I remember the time when one of my staff burst into my office at budget time and said, "How come she got a 5 percent increase and I only got a 3 percent increase. I was stunned by the outburst as both of those increases were very good considering the economy, yet when she compared hers' to a coworker's she saw only the two percent difference. That was grumbling—for what is quite evident from Holy Scriptures is that grumbling is not a legitimate concern or complaint, but rather a turning inside of oneself and operating out of what we might call a scarcity theology.

Today's *Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard* is one where the Kingdom of Heaven is compared to the vine harvest. Grapes had to be picked at the end of September, and the gathering continued

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Established in 1847*

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right up until the rainy season began. The yield had to be stored away by the rainy season, so there was always a sense of urgency. That is why the landowner continued to hire people all day long; idle folks needed to be working. A working day lasted from sunrise until the stars came out, some twelve hours.

*When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said ... pay them their wages.* According to Jewish law, the payment of wages had to take place during the evening of the working day (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:15). This did not always happen, but the worker had the right to demand it. This was a law to protect poor workers against their employers...*beginning with the last ones...and each received a denarius.* Those who came last received the same wages as the landowner had agreed with the first-comers, namely, the full day's wages. And immediately the workers divided themselves into two groups, a satisfied group and a dissatisfied group. When the first-comers saw what the last-comers got, they were upset that the lord of the vineyard gave them the same amount. They felt that they had a right to much more than the others...*so they begin to grumble.*

*Take what belongs to you and go.* Literally the landowner says 'Take up', as if the money lay before him on a table. *I choose to give to this last the same as I give you.* The owner wants to give the last the same as the first, a day's wages, and a minimum income. A denarius, a Roman coin, equivalent to the Greek drachma or half a Jewish shekel was the usual day's wages for a laborer. What was that worth then? Well, a lamb could be purchased for four such denarii. The wages paid to all for their work would have been enough for the worker's family's sustenance; they would not go hungry. For this reason the parable is not simply about the landowner's sovereignty, to do as he wishes with his money, but also and principally it is about his goodness...it is about his generosity.

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Jesus proclaims that in God's way, in God's mind, the concept of fairness is different. And that was just as difficult a notion to grasp in first century Palestine as it is today—we expect that if we worked eight hours in the hot sun we would be paid more than the worker who arrived to work just one hour in the cooler part of the day. Yet Jesus proclaims this practical and worldly understanding limits our vision by being bound to a “scarcity theology”—that is the belief that there is not enough to go around, so I better get mine, or hold onto what is mine.

The world at large and American culture teaches us to take care of our own needs first and lastly to give our resources away from that which is leftover. And certainly this kind of philosophy becomes even more pronounced when we are going through very tough and uncertain economic times. Jesus claims that when we give generously and freely, as the landowner gave to the laborers in the vineyard, there is more than enough. This is a theology of abundance—there is enough.

These days it is easy to get caught up in grumbling about the economy—about the cost of gas and food. And of course for so many in our country things are desperate; people have lost their jobs and homes, and many are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. Yet within our present experience, today's Gospel reminds us again that all that we have comes from God: *All things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.* The gospel challenges us to move beyond grumbling to the generosity of the landowner, for the behavior of the landowner reflects the kingdom of God and kingdom living. **+AMEN**

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