

Grace of God, radical equality (2)
Psalm 139:23-24
Matthew 20:1-16

Last week, Jan 29th, President Barack Obama signed an equal pay bill into law, declaring that it's a family issue, not just a women's issue. I'm very interested in this issue, the equal pay bill, because I have two daughters. So, I agree with the principle of equal pay. This is also a justice issue, as we read in Matthew 20:1-16 today, and as we deal with this very difficult issue today.

Today's most important issue in United States is the unemployment. Last year 2.6 million jobs were lost, the most in a single year since World II. The good thing for those who are living in Wyoming, report said, is that the state of Wyoming has the lowest unemployment rate in the United States.

Last week, I read a sad article on January 27 in the newspaper of a seven-member family who live in Wilmington, southern Los Angeles, who were found dead. The man, the head of the household, killed his five children, age two to eight, his wife and himself with a gun after he heard from his boss, "You don't have to come to work tomorrow." He lost his job and decided to commit suicide with his whole family. That is terribly sad news.

In other news, I read that some Wall Street employees whose firms receive taxpayer help received more than 18 billion dollars in bonuses in 2008. That is discouraging, not only to those who lost their jobs, but also to other blue collar workers. Employment and wage are top issues in our day. It is a shame that Wall Street seems to be bereft of social consciousness when, even now, they persist in their decisions to enrich themselves at the cost of the rest of the country, who are struggling.

Our scripture reading, Matthew 20:1-16, is very interesting and also one of the difficult verses to interpret in the Bible. The parable of Jesus is not easy to understand. One day Jesus told a parable to the disciples. On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (John 6:61)

Like the decision makers in Wall Street firms who didn't have any sense of social consciousness, if we do not have the consciousness of the will of God, we can not understand the picture painted in our Scripture, the picture of the Kingdom of God.

However, this scripture reading gives us some insight and curiosity, especially in the perspective of unemployment and social justice today in our situation in the United States. President Obama is trying to create new jobs for the unemployed. He is saying, "Everybody should work!" That is something with which everybody could agree. That is the picture of today's scripture reading. Everybody is eligible to work and everybody deserves to have compensation with a proper wage. Without work, one can not be responsible. We should pray for that.

We have designated this Sunday, re-scheduled from last Sunday, as Dedication Sunday for our 2009 Church leadership at Faith UMC. I congratulate you, leaders of this church, since you are called as faithful workers in the Garden of God by God through this church. Today's sermon title is the same as last week: "Grace of God, Radical Equality." Today's sermon will be a little different from last Sunday's, even with the same title, as we consider the second part of "Grace of God, Radical Equality." May the Lord open our eyes so that we can find the truth which will free us in today's life. I'd like to share three points of God's ultimate equality today.

First, the worth of all work is ultimately equal. Let's start the first point with a question, "Are there certain jobs which can be distinguished as noble and others ignoble?" There might be distinction between the good and the evil, the productive and the destructive in our society. But, if we are working for the production of that which is good, there is no such division between noble and ignoble labor. In that sense, all workers are equal, absolutely equal. You are all equally worthy workers of God.

A body has many parts. But each part has a different function. Paul mentioned, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." (Romans 12:4-6) Not only in the church, but also in social organisms in general, a community needs all kinds of functions.

Long, long, ago a prestigious cruise ship company in a country sailed through the South Pacific Ocean. The cruise ship agency selected one hundred couples from a list of the richest families in that country. In their group there were businessmen, lawyers, doctors, politicians, world class gamblers, golfers, athletes, artists, top singers, etc. On board the ship were all the famous people in that country, except for the workers on the ship.

After several days of their departure, having had banquets, dancing parties, musicals, and special shows, the cruise ship reached the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. One night, the ship met a storm unexpectedly and the ship was shaken and finally shipwrecked when it was driven into a reef by the severe storm.

All the passengers were able to stay afloat by holding on to pieces of the shipwrecked ship were driven to an unknown island. This was a small-island in which human had never landed. Fortunately, it was warm and there were vegetables and fruits on the island. But there was no food there that they were used to eating on that island. Among the famous people, no one knew what or how to eat the vegetables and fruits on the island.

There was only one survivor there, who had been a bus boy in the kitchen on the ship, who knew which were the edible vegetables and fruits on island. He was nobody before, but now he became the hero who knew how to survive in island. Everybody has a different gift which God has given. Nobody can be judged by what he or she does for a living, or what kind of contribution a person makes in a community. Jobs are all equal.

Second, God's calling for work is equal.

When I first arrived in California from Korea, as an immigrant with a family it was very hard for me and Sun to get a job. I was a minister and Army chaplain in Korea, and in Korea, educated in college and seminary, but my education and experiences were no longer useful for me to find a job. Sun had been a licensed laboratory technician, and had worked in major hospital labs in Korea, but without English speaking fluently her career was of no use for her in seeking a job.

Finally, I got a job after much searching and interviewing. The first job I got was working at a dried fruit factory. I didn't remember what my job title was, but I was supposed to work with a young man, 21 years old, who was my foreman. The job was roasting nuts in boiling oil on top of an oven. Peanuts, cashew nuts, Macadamia nuts, almonds, Brazil nuts, chestnuts, filbert nuts, walnuts, pecans, pistachios, sunflower seeds and pumpkin seeds—these all I roasted.

It was a kind of “3D” job. Do you know what “3D” job means? “3D” means dirty, difficult, and dangerous. There were only two men were working in this location, one was a twenty-one year old young foreman, the other a newly arrived Korean immigrant in his mid-thirties. I was supposed to do whatever the young foreman ordered me to do. He ordered me to do “3D” work while he was resting.

You know that I was a very tricky man. One day at lunch time, I approached this young foreman, sharing my lunch and showing him pictures of me from Korea wearing a military uniform. I said to him, "Do you know Karate?" He said, "Yes, I know that it's a terrible powerful martial art." I continued, saying, "I was a Korean Army officer, captain. I don't know whether you've heard about it or not, the Tiger Division of the Korean Army in the Vietnam War. I belonged to that Tiger Division." He was surprised when I said that.

Then, he immediately asked me if I practiced Karate. I said, "For the officers in the Korean Army, it is mandatory to practice Karate." Then, his eyes grew bigger, and he seemed to be worrying about something. Then, he asked me again if I were a black belt. I said, "I don't have a black belt, but I have a golden belt, which is given to a man who is respected in the Army." This whole story, by the way, had been totally a joke. There is no such belt in Karate. And, Koreans practice Tae Kwon Do, not Karate—which is a Japanese martial art! But, he seemed me to believe seriously what I said. After that day, he didn't order me to do any more “3D” jobs because he feared so much that I could use Karate against him! But, I suggested that we share the “3D” jobs together fairly. And, I treated him well. He was my fellow worker.

There is no division between noble and ignoble work. Every work is sacred if it is work for God. We are called to work and participate in the work of God's creation. In that sense, the Grace of God, in His calling every worker is radically equal. There is no high and low rank in working for God.

We are workers who belong to the other kind of “D” job, which is, “Devotional.” A job is meant to be more than a wage. Jesus said, "Since God is working, I work." God is a worker of creation, recreation and transformation in our daily life. Jesus is also a worker of redemption, salvation and sanctification. Jesus was closely related to the D job. Jesus sat with Dirty people, cared for Difficult sick people and met Dangerous people. Finally, he bestowed his life for the sake of Devotion for all people.

A reporter saw men working at a construction site. One man was working rather lazily. The reporter said, "What are you making?" He answered, "Four dollars an hour." A second man was working rather routinely. The reporter asked, "What are you making?" He answered, "Five dollars an hour." A third man was working enthusiastically, conscientiously, giving his heart and soul to it. The reporter asked him, "What are you making?" And he said, "A cathedral!"

The last man felt a sense of commitment, love, and responsibility. He had stock in what he was doing, pride in it - a sense of mission. He wasn't just going through the motions like those other workers. This man was committed to a dream. He was building a cathedral! He had ownership in it - a sense of mission and purpose.

Third, and lastly, the wages of our works are equal. If the worth of work is equal, and the calling for work is equal, then the wages should also be equal. The parable shows us a radical equality in wage for the workers without differences between the times they were called for work.

God's justice and our justice are different. Our justice is in the perspective of this world, but God's is upon the beyond this world. Thus, the scenario of the workers in the vineyard who earned the same wage is not applicable justice of this world. It is a justice of the Kingdom of God.

The owner of a vineyard agreed to pay all the laborers a denarius for their day's work and sent them into his vineyard. A denarius is the minimum wage for a day. The denarius is a silver coin worth maybe about fifty dollars today. Jesus taught us that the daily bread is enough for a day. So, ask God for your daily bread.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard goes like this. A vineyard owner was looking for workers. Since he needed workers desperately he got up early in the morning and went to the market place to look for workers. And, he found workers there and hired men to work at his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. When he needed more workers later in the day, he went to market place from time to time to hire more workers. Thus, he called workers to work for him several times during the day at different hours of the day.

Who were the first called? And who was the last called and worked only one hour and got a full benefit among us? I think the last called were Sun and myself in some sense, if we should see this parable in the perspective of immigration to the United States: First,

Native Americans; Second, Puritans; Third Europeans; Fourth, African Americans; Fifth, Hispanic Americans; and the Last, Asian Americans.

However, our scripture is not the parable of the United States America, but a parable of the salvation of God. There are four stages to this parable of the workers of vineyard: (1) Idling, verses 1-3, (2) Calling 2, verse 4, (3) Working, verse 7, and (4) Paying, verses 8-16. We also have experienced those stages; Idling, calling, working and Paying. Someone met Jesus at one's twenties, some at thirties, some at forties, some at fifties and some at after sixties. But everybody will get eternal wage of Salvation. That is ultimately equal wage.

I was the last one among eight siblings. When I was a kid my mom used to call me to help her in kitchen. I was glad when she called me in the kitchen. In a kitchen so often mom gave me a bit of spoonful food for the taste. That was a benefit for me to help mom.

I think there is food other than wage in vineyard work. In a real sense, the working itself is food for living. Jesus said to his disciples, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." Jesus saw as food the doing of the "will of him who sent me" and in finishing his work. Work is meant to be more than a wage. Work is not a means of life. It is a meaning of life. In the deepest sense, our work should be connected to the work of God's salvation.

A successful Korean merchant was asked by his apprentice, "What is the success of a merchant?" He told him, "Do you know what a merchant is? The pure profit of a merchant is man." Jesus called fishers at Galilee and said, "Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men." Ultimately, that is the job we are working on. The wage which our worldly work offers is a minimum. Our wage that God will provide us is bigger than that. That is eternal salvation.

I have a gift from my daughter. When we stopped by a rock-shop, I looked at this rock interestingly, and then my daughter thought that I was interested in the rock and secretly purchased and gave it to me as a special present on my birthday. This rock looks like an ordinary rock we can see everywhere. But, as we look inside the rock, it is quite different from the way it looks from the outside. If we could see this rock under ultraviolet rays, it would change its looks, and look to us like a diamond. As I looked at this rock, I had been thinking that it holds inside of itself dignity as a rock. Like this rock, God imprinted his Image and dignity inside of us.

You are the D worker. You are called to the D job. You have dignity in your work. In you God imprinted His Image. You are the chosen by God and sent to the garden of God where God is with you always. Make your work place holy place that God is working with you. Amen.