

Not My Favorite Parable

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 16A

Matthew 20:1-16

The parables Jesus tells are often people's most favorite parts of the New Testament, and I think that's because so much of the time the parables give us characters and stories that we love. Just think, for example, of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. People love the Good Samaritan. That story challenges us, for sure, but it also leaves us with a nice, warm feeling at the end: the stranger that everyone is supposed to hate and have low expectations for ends up being the hero!

And people love the Parable of the Prodigal Son. That's the one where the no-good, ne'er-do-well son asks for his inheritance early and goes off to squander every penny but when he comes home to grovel—surprise!—he's graciously and joyfully welcomed back by his loving father. The son was lost, but now is found! Nice, warm feeling.

Even the parable we heard last Sunday, from the gospel of Matthew, which Jesus tells in response to his disciples' questions about forgiveness is a popular one. People like it. It doesn't really have a nice, warm feeling at the end, but it doesn't need to. The story makes sense and justice is served. This is the parable where the one guy is forgiven a huge debt by his master and then turns right around and rakes some other dude over the coals because he owes him a couple bucks. Nobody wants that guy to win. He's a jerk! And sure enough, when word gets back to the master, the guy gets thrown in prison for being so unforgiving!

Be all that as it may, I find not many people like today's parable. No one says this is their favorite, and it definitely doesn't impart a nice, warm feeling at the end. There are no characters that really win our heart, and there's no sense of justice or fairness, that people get what they deserve. Perhaps more than just about any other parable that Jesus tells, this parable of the workers in the vineyard disrupts our sense of reality, of what's right and fair and equal.

That's especially so in America, where we appreciate a good work ethic, where we make fun of giving out trophies for participation, where any policy proposal that we think smacks of socialism—or, even worse, communism!—gets lambasted in public debate. Just look at how our political candidates are presenting themselves these days. Discussions over health insurance and the minimum wage and economic stimulus are all about who thinks what is fair and equal, and everyone seems to have different ideas about that, but we're sure the other side has it all wrong and will mess everything up. As humans, we are all but programmed to think of accomplishment and achievement in terms of merit and worth. We don't like the thought of people getting more than they deserve, especially in comparison to other people, and even though it's not a lesson on how to run a nation's economy, this parable about the kingdom of heaven messes us up. The first will be last and the last will be first. Excuse me?

It starts with a landowner who goes out to find people to work in his vineyard. I lived in Cairo, Egypt, for a while, and I remember there were certain street corners in the city where day laborers would wait with their tools for someone to come hire them. I was a kid from the suburbs, and that was a sight I had never seen before, all these guys quietly standing there together, waiting for someone to want them. I imagined it to be a fairly precarious way to support yourself, much less a family. So the landowner goes

down to the street corner and asks as few of these guys to help him. They're thankful to be selected, even though it will be backbreaking work, and he agrees to pay them whatever the going daily rate is. OK, fine. Makes sense.

For whatever reason—maybe he misjudged the amount of work he had to get done, maybe they're not working as quickly as he hoped—he goes out about three hours later and hires some more. He doesn't give many details about what he will pay them. There's no contract or anything, but he does say he'll pay them "whatever's right." Again, they're happy to be selected, and so off they go.

This goes on and on all day until it's almost quitting time, when the landowner goes out one more time and finds a few guys who haven't gotten any work. They're still standing there, tools around their waist, faces looking long and realizing they'll be going home to their kids without any food that night. The landowner asks them why they're not working and their response is sad to me: "because no one has hired us." It's like they say, "No one wants us. We feel unimportant, unvalued, worthless."

And then the landowner asks them to go in, too, and at this point we like this landowner, and we are liking this parable. We're getting the feeling that he is more concerned with pulling people into his vineyard than he is with anything else. Good feelings are starting.

But then the whistle blows. It's the end of the day, and the landowner has his manager pay everyone in the most interesting way. Those who had just barely broken a sweat because they came into the vineyard one hour before sundown get the full daily wage. And then, as the payout goes down the line, everyone gets the same thing! If he had some confidential payroll practices things might go a little better. Hello, direct deposit! Understandably, this upsets the guys who got hired first because they naturally think that they'll be paid, like the landowner said, "whatever's right." At the end, they're the ones feeling undervalued, unappreciated...well, at least once they compare themselves to everyone else.

As it turns out, this landowner guy is not about equal pay for equal work. It's like he considers working in the vineyard more of a reward than the paycheck he gives. The opportunity to be called and to serve is the most important part of it all. And his enterprise works on a system of surprise generosity that no one can see coming.

It reminds me a bit of my high school graduation, where there were no valedictorians or salutatorians and no student speeches at all. The principal of R.J. Reynolds High School in Winston-Salem, NC, was a man by the name of Bob Deaton, who was actually a long-time member of my home congregation. He had served as principal at Reynolds for thirty years and apparently relatively early on in his tenure he had done away with any and all accolades at graduation. No one was allowed to wear any sashes for such-and-such honor society or any extra tassels or badges or anything else that might make them stand out above anyone else. All the graduates wore identical white gowns so that if you were in the audience, you were looking at one big group of equal achievers. There was no way you could tell class rank or athletic prowess or how active anyone had been in extracurricular activities.

I thought all of this was normal but I found out that Mr. Deaton's decision to do this was controversial at the time—and I think it would still be considered countercultural—but he was adamant that on graduation day, everyone look the same. Someone told me that it was the parents of the top achievers who initially didn't like it. In the eyes of the world, thought Deaton, a diploma was a diploma. The

achievement was graduation itself, no matter how you'd gotten there, and that's what that principal wanted to communicate.

So it is with the kingdom of heaven, Jesus says. God's gracious decision to include us in his kingdom does not operate on principles of capitalism or merit or any kind of do-goodery. Grace cannot be calculated or estimated and it definitely doesn't work when we try to compare ourselves with others, if we start to think we or anyone else is more or less worthy of it. God is moved towards those who feel undervalued, who haven't been chosen, who stand through life wondering if they've got any worth. God wants people in the vineyard, in the kingdom. There are no ribbons or tassels or sashes here, no signs that anyone is more special or treasured, just the life that Jesus offers on the cross. That is a generosity that no one can see coming.

And if that is what the kingdom of heaven is like, then the church bears the responsibility to proclaim and embody that as best as it can, with the resources it has been given. We take heed of the messages we're sending, both intentionally and unintentionally, and ask if those messages communicate God's grace in the same way as that vineyard. We look at the programs we run, our personal interactions and relationships here and in our daily lives, we assess the use of our building spaces and church grounds, and wonder, "Might certain people feel more valued here than others?" "Might there be ways to draw more people into the kingdom work?" "What message are we sending when we do things this particular way?"

People are telling us that there is an increasing number of people in our culture, in our daily life, for whom the gospel is new, for whom exposure to Christian community is not a given. How can congregations respond, especially congregations like ours that are made up to a large degree of people who are lifelong Christians?

Can we find ways to tell and show to all people, whether they've been in the vineyard since childhood or whether they just received Christ, that all gifts are welcome and valued?

Can we assure each person that there is a way to fit into the glorious work of the body of Christ, that here, as Paul says, "we strive side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel"?

Can we hold in fruitful tension the need for longevity and experience, for the gifts of elders and those who bear helpful institutional wisdom as well as the new energy brought by people who've only been in the community for a little while?

Can we remember, like Jonah in our first reading, that this God is generous and forgiving in ways that sometimes may make us uncomfortable and not make sense to us. It won't seem fair. It won't feel equal. But it will be right.

Only those who've ever gone into our sacristy at the church I serve have probably ever seen that our altar care team has put up a helpful little sign to explain how much wine the communion assistants are to pour into each little glass. There's even a little sample glass and someone has colored on it with magic marker up to a certain ideal fill line. I'm not sure where the need for this came from. Perhaps there were complaints that some people were getting too little. Maybe some were getting too much! However it came to be, I'm kind of proud of that little sign. It's a good reminder that we're all equal at our church in

a really important way. At the communion rail, at Jesus' holy meal, at the foot of the cross, each person, regardless of who they are and how useless they feel—even if they think we sing too many old-timey hymns or not enough, even if they feel they don't have the right clothes to be here or that we don't make folks feel welcome—every one of us is graciously called forth and given purpose for God.

No, this may not always be people's favorite parable, but how can you really show preference when it comes to God's grace? There are no sashes here, no special ribbons or accolades. Maybe, from time to time a nice, warm feeling. But always: a generosity you'll never see coming.

Thanks be to God!

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