

“A Generous God”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 17, 2019

2nd Sunday of Lent

Rev. John Wahl

Matthew 19:23 – 20:16

A few years ago, during a visit with my brother and his family in suburban Atlanta, we decided to tackle one of those home projects on his to-do list: installing a drainage ditch in his yard. As is common with this type of project, we made multiple daily trips to his local Home Depot for supplies. No matter what time of day – morning, mid-day, or afternoon – there would be a pool of laborers waiting in the parking lot, ready to go and work for hire; looking, I would only assume, for a fair day’s wage in order to support and feed their families.

Sometimes, we read the stories of Jesus and the two thousand-year gulf between then and now appears wide; but other times, like today, these tales seem to be as relevant as ever. In this parable, a landowner searching for workers in his vineyard continues hiring laborers throughout the day, morning through afternoon; and, in the end, chooses to pay the workers “whatever is right,” which results in every employee – no matter how many hours they worked – getting the same amount.

In the standard interpretation, this parable is about salvation; the landowner is God, and the workers are Christians. The laborers hired early in the day are lifelong Christians, and those hired late in the day are deathbed converts; and yet, all receive the same daily wage of salvation. All are loved by God and no-one is more deserving of God’s grace just because we’ve been at it longer or accomplished more.¹

But some other things about this parable make me wonder; like the statements that are bookends to this story: in Matthew 19:30 – *But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first*; and then in 20:16 – *So, the last will be first, and first will be last*.

If Jesus is speaking about the sequential order in the parable, then these statements make perfect, literal sense. The laborers who came *last* were the *first* to be paid; while the workers who began *first* were paid *last*. But in choosing to pay the last to come first, the landowner sets up a tension, a twist. The daily wage was

¹ Gregory Rawn, “Laborers, Lasts and Firsts”

what the first-to-come workers would have expected; until, that is, they saw those who worked only a fraction as long as they did get paid the daily wage. Then, the expectations changed; rather than gratitude, resentment grabs hold of them as they grumble to landowner: “it’s not fair!”

But, imagine also how the last laborers hired – the first to be paid – must have felt. They did not desire to work only one hour. Who knows why they were not hired earlier – experience, education, health, citizenship status, skin color – who knows? We can assume, though, that what any day laborer wants is to work and be paid; the late-comers were not lazy, they simply weren’t chosen as early in the day.

The focus of the story, of course, is on the landowner, who sees the potential injustice of workers not getting a living wage because they were not hired for a full day; and desires to make things right, paying wages that are unrelated to the quantity of work, but instead to their need. This may not be a good way to run a business, or to encourage a strong work ethic. But, Jesus isn’t teaching a business class; he is teaching about the kingdom of heaven which God does not run like a business. God gives us what we need; not what we deserve.

Our God is a generous God. But generosity is something that can be difficult for us to understand. Our human nature gravitates to *quid pro quo* situations: we assume that when we receive generosity, we must have done something to deserve it; so we want to measure it, to quantify it. But this parable serves as a reminder of the gift of generosity that does not demand our response; that does not require calculations of “what did I do?” or “what more can I do?” Instead, by its definition, generosity is not transactional, not accountable.²

The last will be first and the first will be last. (20:16) This parable about the kingdom of heaven appears to be about the reversal of the world’s way of ordering itself; so that the way we tend to think about justice and fairness get turned upside down. In the kingdom of heaven, salvation is not earned, but given; and equality is not measured by what we have done and deserve, but by what has been granted to us.

So, what does this say about the way that we are to treat one another today? How does God’s economy – one where fairness gets redefined as getting what you need, rather than what you deserve – differ from our economy? I’m sure you have been following the debates going on regarding what direction our nation’s

² Karoline Lewis, “Generosity Sightings”

economy should be heading; whether we will embrace capitalism or socialism or some nuanced version of one or the other. What about living wages and wealth inequality? What about regulations and oversight; health care and tax policies?

In Jesus' day, terms like capitalism and socialism would not have been recognizable. He lived in a world that predated these concepts; and one where business practices like day labor were likely not the exception, but the norm. It is true that Jesus talks about money more than almost any other subject; in our first reading, he offers to his disciples the cryptic warning that *it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.* (19:24) And yet, he also goes on to say that *for mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.* (19:26)

Most of us don't buy into the idea that the gospel is about personal prosperity; we are not trying to get rich, but instead to provide what is needed for ourselves and our loved ones. What, then, beyond simply working for our daily wage, and being thankful to receive our daily bread, are we to strive for; to long for; to hope for? As theologian Amy Jill-Levine writes, "for the majority of people who come into Jesus' purview, the idea was not to 'give up everything' – it's 'turn your focus to people who need what you have to give.'" Most of Jesus' original followers, Levine says, were neither wealthy nor destitute, but people who had some means, some possessions, but lived in a time of some economic insecurity; what they had – or what they earned – was not guaranteed to always be enough.³

In this parable, the landowner and the day laborers participate in a fair transaction, with a spoken promise to pay *whatever is right.* (20:4) But, in choosing to pay the last first, and the first last, a lesson is offered about what it means to live a good and abundant life; a lesson about our human solidarity; that when people are treated fairly – with equal measures of generosity and respect – then we should be willing to recognize those in need and extend to them our love and assistance; to give generously when and with what we are able.

It was difficult to gather as the church and proclaim the good news of God's love on that Sunday last October following the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings. It is an equally difficult task this weekend, following the deadly mosque attacks in New Zealand. For, we know that in God's eyes, these acts of hatred against people of faith while they are gathered in worship is an atrocity.

³ As quoted by Emily Perper, "Levine: Parable of Landowner and Laborers Teaches Importance of Generosity"

Maybe, then, the reason that Jesus so often talks about kingdom of heaven – more often even than he talks about money or any other issue – is because we need a vision of an alternate way for the world to operate. As we can try to understand a God who provides us what we need, rather than what we deserve; so also we can long for, hope for, pray for, and work for the time when hate and violence give way to love and peace; when all people – and people of all faiths – are valued, and revered. We await this coming day, knowing that if it is up to us, and to our narrow understanding of what generosity really means, it can seem impossible; but – as Jesus promises – with God, all things are possible.

And so, as Christ's followers, we stand with the victim's families and loved ones in New Zealand; even as we stand against bigotry and terror in all of its forms. We pray for and with people of the Muslim faith as we also did with people of the Jewish faith; for we know that all are equally created and loved by a generous God who makes no distinction between first or last, last or first.

In fact, it is this indiscriminate nature of God's love that sometimes so confounds us. Whenever we try to put people in some kind of order: most to least deserving, best to worst behaving, first to last in line; God seems to reverse our expectations. No matter what we have done, and no matter what we perceive others may or may not have done, God loves us all; and within this vision of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus describes, God desires us to be reconciled with one another. May that be our longing, our hope, our work, and our prayer. Amen.