

Rev. Lisa Schrott
September 24, 2023
Matthew 20:1-16
Service To A World That Needs God

Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, your Word surprises, challenges, upsets, and overturns our way of seeing and thinking. Come and find us today wherever we are, however we are. By the power of your Holy Spirit, cause that which is withering in us to blossom and that which is exacting in us to broaden until we see as you see, and thereby glimpse the kingdom you are bringing. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” **This is the Word of the Lord.**

Thanks be to God.

The title of the *NY Times Talk* column caught my attention: *What If Instead of Trying to Manage Your Time, You Set It Free?* The last few weeks have been more tightly scheduled for me than the summer (hello fall!) and more tightly scheduled than I'd like, for a myriad of reasons, so I thought I'd check out the column. The article was a profile of the book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* by Jenny Odell. Odell “argues that standard ways of thinking about time — particularly regarding work and what time is owed and to whom — can obscure potentially more humane and expansive, less self-centered notions of

time, views that go beyond restrictive notions of efficiency or work-life balance.”¹ According to the interview much of the book considers the historical relationship between workers and bosses, and who is in charge of whose time. Odell profiles a type of person whom she calls a “productivity bro” whose main goals are to micromanage time and to consider the return on investment for their time. In our parable this morning, I think we have some “productivity bros”. These “bros” are so concerned that the return on investment for their time is less than other workers that they complain to their boss - the landowner of the vineyard.

We hear in the parable that the workers hired at the beginning of the day found out that they received the same payment as those who worked far less time. In response they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’

But the vineyard owner isn’t buying into this relationship with time. Rather the vineyard owner responds with a reminder that the workers were paid the wage they agreed to, and moreover that they should not be envious of the owners generosity. So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

The last will be first, and the first will be last. As we consider this passage in scripture, it helps to understand where we are in Jesus’ ministry. Last week we heard another parable that considered “what the kingdom of heaven” is like - it is like a king who forgives the massive debt of one of their workers.

The Gospel of Matthew is oriented around the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God² (used interchangeably) and specifically about how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah who will usher in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The first few chapters of Matthew are the “Proclamation of the Kingdom” with Jesus’ birth, baptism, and the beginning of his ministry. Jesus then seeks to “Extend the Kingdom” by ministering to those outside the bounds of the Hebrew faith at that time and by calling all to be workers for the harvest. A short middle section in chapters 11-13 shows that there is “Rising Opposition to the Kingdom,” with debates and disputes about who, when, and where one can serve God. Our parable last week comes from the section where Jesus’ speaks about “The Authority of the Kingdom” and what it means to live as part of the kingdom, including being forgiven and forgiving others. The Gospel of Matthew makes a pivot in chapter 19, as Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus now starts more explicit teaching about the “Coming of the Kingdom” preparing the disciples for what lies ahead.

¹ David Marchese. *What If Instead of Trying to Manage Your Time, You Set It Free?* Interview with author Jenny Odell; May 14, 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/05/15/magazine/jenny-odell-interview.html>

² David Lang, Greg Ward, and Sean Nelson; Outline of Bible Books. Accordance Bible Software v. 13.3.4. OakTree Software Inc. October 2022 update

What do the disciples really need to understand as Jesus' public ministry draws to an end? How does Jesus prepare them for his death? This death that will not just be in an excruciating manner, but also in a humiliating one – publicly crucified on a cross as a criminal. How does Jesus prepare the disciples for his resurrection? That three days after his death he will be raised up and that he will appear to them again before ascending into heaven.

Jesus prepares the disciples for his death and resurrection by teaching them that the Kingdom of God operates with a different set of parameters. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. The kingdom of God is like a vineyard owner who pays all the same wages, who invites all to the banquet. The kingdom of God is based on a mindset of abundance, not scarcity. The kingdom of God is not a zero sum game, where my piece of the pie is reduced because you are invited to the table. The kingdom of God turns hierarchies upside down. It does not function as an “us” vs. “them” world.

I find it interesting that the complaint the workers make is not that they ought to be paid more, but rather that the late-arrivers ought to be paid less and that the vineyard owner had “made them equal to us.” This is the same complaint we hear Jonah make in the scripture I shared for the children’s sermon. Why should God spare the people of Ninevah? From Jonah’s perspective they are evil and wicked, they are beneath him, his enemies. They are most certainly “them” not “us.” Jonah even confesses to God that the reason he ran the other way from going to preach in Ninevah was that he knew God was a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. And Jonah didn’t want to see that mercy extended to “them.”

Both Jonah and the vineyard workers fall into the trap that can way too easy for us – that of a “work-and-reward ethos”. This is the idea that goods should be distributed according to the effort we put in and the quality of the job. As one commentator notes: “...indeed, it’s striking to consider just how much of our everyday lives — at home, at school, at work, and even in personal relationships — is saturated with this basic idea: you get out what you put in. But the householder’s response makes clear that this vineyard, and by extension, “the kingdom of heaven,” operates with a very different, apparently upside-down logic. Divine blessings are given not according to who works the hardest, but rather according to the free, generous will of the householder. Such blessings, then, are actually not rewards at all — but gifts. The governing ethos of the “kingdom of heaven” isn’t work-and-reward, but rather gift-and-gratitude.”³

³ Salt Project. *Commentary for the Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost*.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/14/us-and-them-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>

As someone raised in the “work-and-reward” world, saturated in this reality, the adjustment to a “gift and gratitude” mentality can be jarring. It requires not just a shift in thinking, rather a shift in “seeing” in every interaction I have. It especially requires me to “see” differently when I am serving as Christ’s body on earth. We are a people called to serve. We lift up that call each week at the end of worship when we acknowledge that we are sent out from this place. That Sunday is just the beginning, and that the real work begins when we walk through the doors. We lift up the words from Matthew 25: “ ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ”

As much as I love this passage of scripture, I also struggle with how it can be misappropriated in the church, how it can lead to “us vs. them” thinking. We are called to serve the hungry, and the naked and the prisoner. And we are called to see them as members of the God’s family. These are not simply statistics – they are real life flesh and blood, neighbors, community members, family. It can be tempting sometimes for us to depersonalize the other – the “them” – the hungry, the poor, the foreigner, the prisoner. They become data points – examples that prove our point – whatever that point may be. They become anecdotes and tweeted photos; they become the subjects of our anger, our frustration, our pity, our compassion.

We judge them - we judge as to whether they deserve our help; we judge them based on our own life experiences - our skill, our good fortune, our law abidingness; we judge them because that is what our brains do – our brains are amazing at making categorizations – bigger, smaller, greater, less, darker, lighter, good, bad. This ability of our brain has great survival value for us as a species – throughout our evolutionary history it helped keep us safe – who is a predator, which odor signifies spoiled food, which shelter will protect us. But this tendency to make constant judgements, has a deep shadow side, in that it keeps reinforcing this “us vs. them” mindset.

In the words of preparation in the bulletin I shared a quote from the Salt Project, a progressive Christian blog that I think sums up our challenge particularly well: “For when we see each other not as rivals but rather as fellow beneficiaries of God’s merciful gifts, equally “un-entitled” and equally beloved, the whole idea of “us vs. them” begins to fall away. The report that “you have made them equal to us” becomes a cause for delight and celebration, not complaint. And what emerges, in the end, is an ever-widening “we”: children of God in the image of God, the One who turns the world rightside-up, humbling the “first” and lifting the “last.” ⁴

⁴ *ibid*

What a beautiful concept – “An ever-widening “we”: children of God in the image of God.” This ever-widening “we” is what we celebrate in our mission statement at PCO.

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos,
We believe that in life, in death,
We belong to God.
The Church exists to invite everyone
to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ.
Through service to a world that needs God.

The “us vs. them” becomes a “we” when we not just recognize, but also celebrate, that we belong to God and that because we – all of us – belong to God, when we gather as a church we do so to invite everyone to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ through service to a world that needs God.

The world needs God. And by the world, I mean that “we” need God. It is not “them” who need God, served by “us.” We exist in a mutuality because we all have received the gift of undeserved grace and we all respond with gratitude.

Yesterday I had an opportunity to explore the Cranbrook Art Museum and Gardens in Bloomfield Hills. It was the closing day of an exhibit by the fiber artist Sonya Clark titled *We Are Each Other*. In Clark’s work, craft and community are intertwined across racial, gender, and socioeconomic divisions.⁵ The title of the exhibit and the inspiration come from the poem about civil rights activist *Paul Robeson* (1971) by Gwendolyn Brooks. The poem ends with the phrase: “we are each other’s harvest: we are each other’s business: we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”⁶

The Church exists to invite everyone
to join the lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ.
Through service to a world that needs God.

Friends, that is why we serve. There is no “us” and “them.” We are each other’s harvest: we are each other’s business: we are each other’s magnitude and bond. May it be so. Amen.

And now let us share the words together of The PC(USA) Confession of 1967, written in a time when our denomination that found itself in an era shaped by the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s, seeking to be faithful to Gospel, yet also recognizing that for far too long, the church had perpetuated injustice by failing to embrace the gifts of being “we” rather than an “us and them.”

⁵ <https://cranbrookartmuseum.org/exhibition/sonya-clark-we-are-each-other/>

⁶ Gwendolyn Brooks. *Paul Robeson*. <https://poets.org/poem/paul-robesson>

Affirmation of Faith

From the PC(USA) Confession of 1967

in unison

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church's mission. His human life involves the church in the common life of all people. His service to men and women commits the church to work for every form of human well-being. His suffering makes the church sensitive to all human suffering so that it sees the face of Christ in the faces of persons in every kind of need. His crucifixion discloses to the church God's judgment on the inhumanity that marks human relations, and the awful consequences of the church's own complicity in injustice. In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming, the church sees the promise of God's renewal of human life in society and of God's victory over all wrong.