

September 24, 2023
Pentecost 17 – Proper 20A
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

*In the Name of our generous God,
whom we worship as Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Who among us has never said, “it’s just not fair”? It may be small comfort, but when we listen to the Scriptures today, we realize we’re in good company. There are the Children of Israel grumbling in the desert because they’ve run out of food on a journey to God knows where. Then there are Moses and Aaron saying, “wait a minute! Don’t yell at us, we’re only the messengers.” And there is so much griping going on in Matthew’s parable of the vineyard that we might think that vine and whine are the same word. It’s just not fair.

If you grew up with siblings (and I have four), one of the earliest lessons you learn is that life is never fair. My parents established a method of marking certain milestones in our lives. One of these markers was to give us our first wristwatch when we turned 12.

Imagine how the four older siblings felt when our youngest sister got a watch when she was only 11. We were completely bent out of shape. She wasn’t 12. She didn’t have to wait that extra year like we all did. She always got everything. Etc., etc., etc.

It feels silly now to think about how childish we were – but we were only children, prone to sulking, concerned first and foremost with ourselves.

From our vantage point here in Muncie this morning, it’s easy to think of the grumbling Children of Israel and the whiney vineyard workers as sulking children. “Of course,” we say, “God can distribute bounty any way God wants. After all God is God.” “Those silly people in the Bible – they just didn’t get it, did they?”

It is easy to appreciate God’s grace when it happens to us. We may consider it miraculous; we might even think that we deserve it. We are just fine with “the last will be first and the first will be last.” So long as we end up first.

But think of how resentful and angry we can be when someone else ends up first. Especially someone who hasn’t really worked for it. Who hasn’t really earned it. Who is only 11. Who isn’t one of us.

But Jesus never says, “The Kingdom of God is like you.” Or like me. Jesus never even says that the Kingdom of God is “fair.” But, over and over, in parable after parable, Jesus does tell us that the Kingdom of God is like God. Or, to put a finer point on it, the Kingdom of God is like God’s heart: gracious and inclusive.

Gracious in the way that the Children of Israel are fed in the desert – exactly enough for the needs of each day.

Inclusive in the way that the landowner called all and sundry to come to work for him – even when there was little daylight left, and then paid them all the same.

The Children of Israel who are led into the wilderness and the day laborers who are called into the vineyard are, like Grace Church Parish, held in the heart of a gracious and inclusive God – a God who feeds and enfolds us ... all of us.

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A landowner goes out early in the morning and hires laborers for the day to work in his vineyard. Then, four more times, he finds other laborers looking for work, and he hires them too. At the end of the day, he pays them all a full day's wage – even the ones who only worked that last hour.

Some of us are already grumbling with indignation. It's preposterous that those who have worked for only an hour should be paid the same as those who've toiled through the heat of the entire day. It's just not fair!

The landowner asks, "are you envious because I am generous?" Writer Mary Gordon, in her book *Reading Jesus*, calls this "an impossible question, calling for an impossible honesty." Because yes, she writes: "I am envious because you are generous. I am envious because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone got away with something. Envy has eaten out my heart."¹

Do you see yourself anywhere in this story? For this overprepared overachiever, I imagine I would have been first in line when the sun came up, working hardest and longest. At the end of the day, I got what I was promised, but I'm bitter and envious of the Johnnies-come-lately.

But then, on good days, I remember other times in my life when, for any number of reasons, I didn't show up until late. But at the end of that day, I got more than I had expected, more than I had earned – twelve times more. And I was ecstatic, stunned, and grateful.

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Preachers, including me, usually take this moment to talk about economic systems, income disparity, and such like. But this week, I hear the Parable of the Generous Landowner as another example of the Jesus in Matthew's gospel banging on about the importance of community. In the last couple of weeks, we've heard about community built on love and community built on forgiveness. Today, it's about community based on how God regards us...as equal in God's sight, and in God's heart.

God doesn't measure us the way we measure each other. God doesn't seem to be interested in appearances, or strength, or power, or income, or talents, or abilities. God doesn't

¹ Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels*. Pantheon, 2009.

seem to care why we didn't show up before dawn to find work, or even (and this is scandalous) the fact that you're only 11. God calls all of us, God even calls "them," because the presence of all of us is required for genuine community, the community that God dreams for us.

We get to sing this truth in today's closing hymn, *Come, Labor On*. This is a hymn that we always belt out with great gusto, as we should. But the poet sneaks in a powerful phrase that might get lost in the shuffle, so I invite you to pay attention to it as it goes by, to taste the words as you sing it: *By feeblest agents may our God fulfill his righteous will*.

We are all feeble at some point, which is why God calls us all into community. Those who have been called first are invited to join God in calling the last ones – whoever they may be – instead of comparing and complaining.

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I want to leave you this morning with a passage from a short story by Flannery O'Connor called *Revelation*, which I recommend to you all. It's about the effect of a revelation on a proud, middle-aged, middle class, rural, white Southern woman in the mid-20th century. Mrs. Turpin's confidence in her own salvation was founded on a vigorous sense of self-righteousness; she was always comparing herself publicly to others. Throughout the course of the story, her confidence falters and crumbles.

Here is the end of the story. It is evening, and Mrs. Turpin is standing out by the hog pen.

"...the sun slipped finally behind the tree line. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. ... A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. (Ed. These were, of course, the people she detested.) There were whole companies of [poor] white [folks], clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black folks in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.

And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself ..., had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She ... gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she ... made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.²

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Are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last. *By feeblest agents may our God fulfill God's righteous will. Amen.*

² The conclusion of Flannery O'Connor's *Revelation*. The Sewanee Review, 1967. Text slightly edited.