

SERMON- Proper 20 (A)
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Exodus 16:2-15

Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
September 24, 2023

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

OPENING:

Two stories about this passage:

1) First from the very start of my ordination process, even before I went to Seminary or anything, the Diocese of Virginia sends you to this retreat center, in an old mansion in downtown Richmond, with people in a similar boat than you. Everyone is really excited and really nervous and you get there and you are ready to start this journey and prove to everyone how worthy you are to be there.

Once we got there, we went into a meeting room and the very first exercise we did was the leader had us read this passage of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard.

Then he had us break into different groups, 3 groups of 3-4 different people. And each group had a different part to play in the story.

One group was the Landowner/ God.

Another group was the People who showed up early, and received a wage.

And the final group was the People who showed up late, and received the same wage.

And our job in these small groups was to come up with a series of questions that we would ask the other groups.

I was in the group that showed up late and received the equal wage, and so we worked on our questions, and what our potential follow ups would be as the other groups did the same.

Eventually we were called back together, questions in hand, ready to start this exercise, pretty well-invested in what was going on.

The retreat leader then said, that we were going to ask the questions, but we were not allowed to respond to the other persons' questions.

So we would each ask a question, but no one would respond. But rather the next group would ask a different question to a different group.

So what happened next? **All hell broke loose.**

The questions quickly got really harsh and vindictive.

I remember our group asked the “God” group:

“How come you set us up for failure? How come we had to be the ones who look like the free-loaders? Why do we have to be pawns in your cosmic plan to prove some economic point?”

The other groups were no less harsh:

“How come you think you deserve as much money as us?”

And on it went, and because we were not allowed to answer any questions, everyone was just talking past each other, and getting pretty excited and angry at people we had just met.

And interestingly, all that energy—the ‘Kumbaya path to priesthood’ vibe—vanished in this one exercise.

Eventually, the leader called quits on the game and we gathered back together, and he asked us how we felt about the exercise.

And his general point was that that sort of communication, zero-sum, complete lack of listening, is obviously the wrong way for a group to communicate, but that we need to be prepared for it because that’s sometimes how the church communicates.

Afterwards, I asked the leader privately:

“so... have you ever done this exercise before?”

And he said a couple of times.

“How did it go?”

“Usually much worse.... *Men’s group*—**blood bath.**”

SECOND STORY:

Fast forward a few years and I had graduated from VTS, Virginia Theology Seminary, the flagship of the Episcopal Church, celebrating 200 years next month. I had had a good 3 years there, learned a lot, Mark was born, gotten ordained, gotten my first job.

But, at some point, during our time there, the Seminary announced that it would become TUITION FREE and that it would no longer charge, and would instead provide free schooling, free housing, with a stipend for medical care and on and on.

Can I tell you the anger and resentment that I felt at that moment? I had just spent 3 years cobbling together enough money by working a campus job, depleted my savings. My poor wife had been working in the trenches of the mental health field and all of it had gone to this school, with a huge endowment and a gorgeous property, and which NOW was going to let people walk in for free.

We were mad, and we are still a little bit. Whenever the school calls asking for money, not proud to say, I remind them of this inequity.

And I think about this passage. And how I know why those laborers grumbled at the “johnny-come latelys” who got paid the same wage as those who came earlier.

Now, I know this is a story about God’s generosity, and of unmerited grace, but you put a price tag on something, and we all become these laborers, we all get out the measuring stick out pretty quickly.

I also know that, relatively speaking, my story is not that grand of an injustice. My guess is that many of you can recall worse stories from your own life: of the unfairness of our economic system, or perhaps life in general, where we have begrudged whoever is responsible.

If it’s Uncle Sam, or it’s your callous boss in the C-suite, that’s one thing. But what if it’s God who is doing the distribution of goods and services in an unfair manner. What do we do then?

SHIFT

Going back to my first story, the point that the leader was trying to make was that this Parable indeed is about the Impossibility of God’s grace, the logic-defying, infuriating, makes-no-sense quality of God’s love for us. In my situation, we were coming into that weekend, and we were trying to be the best, trying to prove our worth, and the point of this parable and the exercise was, in a larger sense, that we did not need to do that. That our lives had already been redeemed, transformed, and re-created by an all-merciful and all-loving God. Regardless of when you start working, or how you perceive you are rewarded.

Parables are always dangerous and this one is a dangerous sermon to preach so close to Stewardship Season, as we start to come up with our budget for next year, as we keep an eye on the giving for this year, as we beseech you for *your* wages. There is a disconnect, I will admit, between this parable and then the counting and weighing and estimating that we do, because every dollar that you give matters does matter greatly to this church, and that we pray and we plan and we count because it’s so vital to our mission.

This passage seems to favor a different calculus than we are used to: a reckless generosity rather than careful virtue. We don’t like this because giving and Philanthropy, for whatever reason, has become the domain of maximum efficiency and almost microscopic attention to result.

Contrast that with the landowner's almost flippant hiring practices and irresponsible salary decisions.

Or with the bookend story to this one, where the woman anoints Jesus's feet with the expensive oil.¹ The disciples are aghast: "we could have given this money to the poor. We could have gotten a greater rate of return in the mission field somewhere." And Jesus shuts them down.

CONCLUSION

I will close with how I opened, with a story, that hopefully keep this Parable as a livewire in your imagination, beckoning and working its way into your soul.

Here at St. Tim's, we contract with a cleaning company and we have a woman who cleans the building and she is wonderful, I see her in the afternoon most days and we communicate through broken Spanish and English.

One day this week, she came into my office and I looked up and she was holding something in her hand, and she told me in fractured sentences that she had found this \$50 bill in the sanctuary while she was cleaning. She handed it to me and I was deeply moved by her integrity and her honesty, kind of stood there for a second with it as I thanked her. As she left, I thought that I should follow her and give it to her. I thought about this passage and how many hours of work that thus decision represents to her. I could give it back and that would represent justice. And She deserved it.

I thought more about it: about how money is secular, money is profane, in that old sense of the word, it's also dirty, physically dirty, And then I thought about how she had done this act seemingly without thinking, that this must happen a lot in her profession, and how it was dropped in the church, and presumably someone probably was thinking of donating it.

SO I thought that she made this money, which *was* secular and profane and dirty, she made it holy, she made it sacred. She made it whole, by giving it back to God.

So it sits in the safe, this \$50 bill is reckless in a sense, reckless in that somewhat dropped it, reckless in that she gave it to me when she probably needs it more, reckless in the sense that no one knows where it will end up.

¹ Matthew 26.6-13

The landowner in our story somehow made the work and the wages on that hot day in the hot vineyard HOLY, by paying everyone the same wage.

It does not quite make sense, it's not fair.

But recall that Jesus did the same thing, he made us holy by sweating and dying for us on the cross, on a hot day for 3 hours, for 6 hours, for 9 hours, so that we would not have to.

So we would all get the same reward and we would be whole with God again.

AMEN.