

Proper 20A  
Matthew 20:1-16  
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood  
September 24, 2017

### Otherworldly Generosity

Today is one of the Sundays you won't hear preaching on a Bible lesson from The Path. It's the first weekend of Fall Break and we anticipated that many of our families could be away, so we've shifted back to the regular Lectionary lessons.

These last couple of weeks we've been reminded that humankind is made in God's image and all of God's creation is good. We have a marvelous potential to do amazing things, but we're also subject to sin. Our God-given ability to think and wonder, to imagine and decide on a course of action, also allows us to make the wrong choice, causing harm to both ourselves and others. But God is always with us, reaching out to us, loving us, and constantly showing us God's otherworldly generosity.

In today's gospel story of the workers in the vineyard we hear another example of God's grace, but within a story that can set us on edge. This strange sequence of events doesn't fit into our idea of quid pro quo, equal actions and reactions, nor our usual thinking about fairness. And to make sure we're not lulled into thinking this story of God's otherworldly generosity is simply a one-off, the lessons surrounding today's gospel tell a similar story. The Kingdom of God is NOT what we expect, for this is where the first will be last and the last will be first.

If you flip back a chapter in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been sought out by a man who asks him what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus begins his response with a discussion about the commandments, and the young man affirms he keeps God's law, for he doesn't do what he shouldn't and he does what he should. So Jesus tells him there is only one thing left for him to do: to sell all he has and give it to the poor. But this is too much, for the young man had many possessions.

The disciples are shocked when they hear Jesus say how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven — harder than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle — for culturally, wealth and success was seen as receiving God's blessings. So Peter jumps in for clarification, reminding Jesus that he and the disciples have given up everything to follow him. "So what will we have?" Jesus answers, "All who have left everything behind, will receive 100 times more and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first."

Interesting answer. It's powerful to know that you'll receive so many blessings, so much more than was sacrificed. But what about that second part of Jesus' answer: "the first will be last and the last will be first." At the very least, it's a reminder not to get too caught up in special privileges or special treatment — a reminder that we can't earn our way into the Kingdom, for Jesus' way is not our way.

And right after today's lesson is another reminder, as the mother of James and John asks for something special for her sons, a request that they sit at Jesus' right hand and his left in the kingdom. These are seats of honor, placing them, in human terms, above the other disciples.

Not surprisingly, the other disciples don't take this well and Jesus responds again about the kingdom of heaven. While the ways of the world give those in authority the power to lord over

another, in God's kingdom, whoever wants to be great must instead be as a servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for the lives of many.

Otherworldly generosity. Whoever truly wants to be first, would be last.

It's between these two teachings, that Jesus shares today's story, a story the disciples could easily relate to. Day laborers would routinely be found in the marketplace. Hiring for a day's work was not only normal, but great news! Those initial workers would be thrilled knowing that they'd receive a full day's wages and their families would be fed. What a blessings to have a good day's work — a day without anxiety, a day of peace.

Strangely, this landowner keeps going back to the marketplace, each time returning with more workers, each time indicating they will be paid whatever is right. Even those selected late in the day are happy to go.

When the day's work is done, all are paid in reverse order, beginning with those who have worked the least. Each receives a full day's pay. And the outcome seems obvious. The full-day workers, seeing that those who worked so little had received so much, start grumbling. Not because their original expectations weren't met, but because of our human view of what's right. It's not fair for those who worked less not to receive less, or rather, it's unfair for those who worked more, not to receive more.

This landowner's idea of fairness doesn't fit our own, and we hear him reminding the workers that he has the right to be generous. "Are you envious because I am generous?"

Envy. Have you ever felt somehow diminished when someone else is recognized? Or jealous when someone else achieves an expected reward?

In the Greek, this phrase "Are you envious because I am generous" literally translates as "is your eye evil because I am good? An evil eye suggests a deeper problem, a soul-problem, for the eye is the lamp to the body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, if you have the "evil eye," your whole body will be full of darkness. An "evil eye" is the opposite of generosity, encompassing jealously, greed, and envy.

Think back to that rich young man who couldn't let go of all his possessions. Perhaps he feared that without his things, he wouldn't be noticed — he couldn't be seen — so he couldn't let go. Being looked up to, being envied, may have mattered too much.

Perhaps James' and John's desire for those special seats in the Kingdom, their need to be recognized as special, was also envy-caused . . . that desire to have power and status above others.

And couldn't some of discontent of the full-day workers be that there would be no envy? For if those full-day workers weren't paid more, they couldn't win in that daily competition to achieve more than another. That sense of being special or more deserving wouldn't be theirs!

The last will be first and the first will be last.

This is a difficult lesson for all of us. Maybe that's why Jesus keeps repeating it. In God's Kingdom, earthly status-seeking makes no difference. In God's Kingdom, resources aren't considered a zero-sum game, that for me to gain, someone else must lose. In God's Kingdom, there's more than enough. There's no soul-problem, no evil-eye, for the body is full of light.

What could our lives look like — if we both believed and lived into the idea of God's abundance — if we could leave behind the envy and fear that someone else's gain would be our loss?

- Could we more clearly see others as children of God, recognizing and respecting the dignity of every human being, regardless of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, social or economic status?
- Would living into Jesus' words — that the last will be first and the first will be last — lead us to act differently towards immigrants, refugees, towards people of color, strengthening us all to strive for justice and peace?

Jesus tells us, again and again, distinctions don't matter. Envy, jealousy, and status don't matter, for God's generosity is otherworldly. Grace is the last word, for all is Grace. How will we choose to live into God's grace and carry Christ's light into the world? *Amen.*