

“Worthy of Our Trust”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20A) – 19 & 20 September 2020
Matthew 20:1-16

This is a piece of cotton fiber paper with ink on it. There are several numbers, a picture of a famous person, and a few signatures and symbols and statements. It’s known more commonly as a \$1 bill, because that’s what we’ve been taught to call it. After all, it does have the number one and the word dollar on it in several places, so that must be what it is.

To get a piece of paper like this, we have to be given it or steal it or trade it in exchange for an item or a specific amount of our time and effort. We also know that if we take this piece of paper into a store, we can choose an item, like a pack of gum, hand the paper to a person, usually a stranger, and they will accept it for the gum, but why? You can chew gum or the piece of paper, but one experience will be much better than the other. The reason we can get gum by handing over a piece of paper is that we believe it has value, but its value isn’t always the same.

In places like Hawaii or Alaska or Manhattan or Los Angeles, this piece of paper is worth considerably less than it is in Louisville, in terms of what you can buy with it. In places like Ecuador, an impoverished South American country that uses the American dollar for its currency, it’s worth much more. And even here at home, the value varies over time. Thirty years ago, you could put a gallon of gas in your car for a dollar. You can’t do that anymore, not matter how many Kroger points you’ve got, and 30 years from now, you might not be able to buy a pack of gum with it.

The only real reason why this particular piece of paper matters more than the piece of paper that has my sermon on it is trust. Without trust, the whole system collapses. You give me a pack of gum for this piece of paper only because you trust that someone else will accept the

same piece of paper and give you something you want. The worth, the value of this piece of paper depends solely on trust, a trust must extend to a gigantic network of relationships among governments, banking institutions, and billions of total strangers.

We don't give it much thought, because we can't see any other practical way to get what we want and need and, therefore, we have agreed to trust people we don't know, and that's just plain weird, but somehow it works. Our level of trust is so great that almost all of us use most of our waking hours trying to obtain, trade, or save these pieces of paper, and we invest so much value in them that if I burned or tore up this dollar bill, which presumably belongs to me, I'd be committing a federal crime. I could do the same thing with a cross, and in most situations, law enforcement can't touch me. So which one is regarded as more sacred in our society?

If only our trust in God came so automatically to us. We never doubt that the piece of paper will work, but God, on the other hand, well . . . In our defense, God tends to be a lot less tangible and less predictable than a one dollar bill, but the real problem is that we cannot have a transactional relationship with God.

Money, goods, and services involve transactions. Relationship with God does not, though some people try very hard to pretend it does. The most egregious example being the name-and-claim-it prosperity gospel preached in some churches, that assert the more you give, the more you'll get, as if God runs some sort of invincible investment portfolio or a divine Ponzi scheme.

Of course, that's just the most obnoxious example. All of us, from time to time, try to make deals with God on our own terms. It happens most often in the foxholes of life, both literal and figurative, the crises where we're pinned down and feel helpless and need a way out. God,

I'll trade you this for that, but it doesn't work that way, and nothing reveals the odd economy of God quite like the parable of the vineyard owner.

That man was a rascal. He went to the market to find workers periodically throughout the day. Some sweat in the sun from dawn to dusk, while others got there when the job was almost done. It seems only fair that X amount of hours would equal Y amount of money, but this guy runs his business strangely.

The last to arrive were first in line and got an entire day's pay for just a few hours of work. Imagine the excitement of the guys who got there earlier. This was going to be a stellar payday for them, but it didn't work out that way. Everybody got paid the same.

Understandably, they complained, and we would have, too. Imagine starting a job in January. Then new coworkers come in March and July and November, but at the end of the year, for the same work, everybody gets paid the same amount. Would you stay at that job? Maybe have a few words with your soon-to-be former employer? But when the workers objected, the man in charge wasn't having any of it.

This is my vineyard. This money belongs to me, and I'll do with it as I please. It's not about you. It's about me, not what you think you've earned or deserve. Everything the owner said was true, but his behavior was seen as a fundamental breach of trust, a departure from the System, the way things were done.

Welcome to God. He doesn't play by our rules or negotiate contracts, because everything belongs to God, including us, so there's no transaction possible, no exchange to be made. To God, a dollar bill is just a piece of paper. But He does offer us a deal, one we'd be foolish to reject, because it is the most lopsided deal ever, so heavily tilted in our favor that some people would call God a sucker for it.

Here's the deal. God gives us what we need. We answer God's call when he comes looking for people to work in His vineyard. That seems like a fair trade, a reasonable transaction, but it's not, because our need is so great. It's like putting a one dollar down payment on a million dollar house, and God gave us the dollar to start with. Except in this case, the dollar isn't a piece of paper. It's our lives.

We need to be freed from the sin that leads us to certain death. God offers forgiveness and the strength to accept it and share it with others, so that we can receive the promise of life everlasting, not to mention a truly meaningful, worthwhile life here and now.

We need to escape the confusion of a world filled with deceit, delusion, and downright lies. We crave someone wise and honest and reliable to trust in a world choked with suspicion and betrayal. God gives us guidance, through scripture and worship and prayer, to find truth and wisdom in the good news of Jesus Christ.

We need to be loved and valued and cherished in a world full of hate and abuse and neglect. How much we yearn for a sense of belonging, because in our increasingly tribal society, how often we feel excluded, isolated, abandoned. We need rock solid hope when the quicksand of despair threatens to swallow us alive. We need the peace to abide when we suffer, the faith that anchors us in the storm.

Our need is practically endless. Fortunately, God's mercy IS endless. And what does all this cost us? Nothing, really, because what God offers is priceless, and we couldn't buy it if we tried. It's not a transaction. It's a relationship that involves a process of transformation that leads to transcendence.

So what does God want? What's in it for him? God wants something that already belongs to Him – us – but he wants us to give ourselves freely and lovingly by working in the vineyard. He won't force us. It's our choice. That's the deal.

Everyone receives the same payment, so it's tempting to hang back, wait until the day – or our life – is almost over before we pitch in, but when we consider the price paid for us, the cost that bought us out of slavery, Jesus on the cross, the grateful stand ready to start at dawn and work hard in the vineyard of God. Amen.