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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, September 24, 2023

Proper 20, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary Track 1

[Exodus 16:2-15](#)

[Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45](#)

[Philippians 1:21-30](#)

[Matthew 20:1-16](#)

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I think one of the reasons this parable Jesus tells is so powerful and challenging is that it comes so close to our lives today. Sometimes Bible-times stories feel removed from the twenty-first century and we have to do some translation work to help swords and chariots and Roman legions connect with a world of Netflix and Venmo and missile defense talks. But this one could pretty much happen on any given day right here, right now, especially for us who live in Sonoma County: here is a group of day laborers hoping to be hired to go work in a vineyard, hoping to make enough money to feed themselves and their families, and here is the vineyard owner who needs their work to bring in the harvest.

And he acts in some unusual ways that don't seem to completely satisfy anyone, except perhaps those workers who came in right at the end of the day. I don't know if our gospel story quite fits neatly into any one political or economic perspective. On the one hand I've seen triumphant capitalist interpretations of this parable that point out that the apparent-God figure is a wealthy landowner whose right to do what he chooses with his money is unchallenged and who doesn't just hand out cash but creates work opportunities—wealthy landowner as job creator, a story that would warm the heart of Ronald Reagan. On the other hand I've seen equally triumphant socialist or even communist interpretations of this parable that point out that what the landowner does is create a kind of social safety net, a full-employment program, and in the end what we get is “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,” a story that would warm the heart of Karl Marx.

I think the gospel has a lot to say about economic justice. I think we can't read the parables without being convicted both personally and at a societal level about the ways we allow people to go hungry in a world that produces more than enough food to feed everyone, to sleep on the streets in the richest country on earth, and about unequal opportunities based on zip codes and who your parents are. Yet I don't think this parable is intended primarily to support anyone's 21st-century ideology of how to get that feeding and sheltering and opportunity-building done. There is more going on here even as we can't afford to lose sight of that very basic level that is about making sure every single person has a basic daily wage.

One of the things going on in the time and place this gospel was written was the inclusion of Gentiles in the church: people who had not shared in the long faithfulness of the people of Israel, people who had arrived at the “last minute,” so to speak, and were suddenly being included in the Jesus movement, the church, on an equal footing. When Matthew included this parable in this gospel story, that may well have been the interpretation that was most important for that generation of Christians. Of course Matthew’s gospel also has a lot to say about other groups of people who surprisingly get included into the family of God: tax collectors, sinners, people on the margins of society for real or perceived transgressions. So this story may also be about how God’s grace is the same for everyone: it’s not about “deserving it” or “earning it.”

God’s love doesn’t come in tiers for the A students, B students, and C, D, and F students. Which has always been challenging for those who think of themselves as A students. It’s like the story of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke, where the son who squandered his father’s abundant gifts drags himself home in shame only for the father to welcome him with a huge celebration—yet the older son, the responsible one who’s been home the whole time, complains. And it’s like the story of the manna God provides from heaven while the Israelites are wandering in the desert. Each person miraculously gets just the right amount of manna for each day, not too much, not too little; those that try to hoard extra find it goes bad overnight. There’s no “good enough” and “honor roll” in God’s provision for us. God isn’t like a judge who rewards us with the appropriate prize for our achievement level, but like a good parent who knows us intimately and gives us, not what we earn, but what we need.

Today after the 10:15 service we are holding a Ministry Fair—a celebration of many of the ways we at Incarnation come together to serve and grow. This is really the first of two ways this fall that we’re invited to consider how we will give of ourselves as part of this faith community. Later this fall we’ll have our annual pledge campaign, when we ask each of our members and friends to discern how we will support our shared ministries financially. Sometimes people talk about giving to the church through “time, talent, and treasure,” and indeed every Christian is called to support our common mission in these ways, whether a lot or a little. Everyone can give some amount of money toward our mission, whether it’s a very large or very small amount, and similarly, everyone can participate in some way with their time and talents in the ministries of our church, whether it’s a very large or very small amount. So you might say that today is our pledge drive for time and talent, and later this fall will be our pledge drive for treasure, and both are ways that we as faithful servants of God can go into the vineyard, can participate in the work God has given us to do.

And as we do, we should keep some things in mind, inspired by this parable. For one: God does not measure your worth by how many ministries you sign up for or how much time you spend doing them. For one thing, all of us are called to serve God in our daily lives in all kinds of ways: through faithfulness and honesty in our work, paid or unpaid; through kindness and devotion to our loved ones; through being good citizens in our communities. Organized activities in the church are just one form of ministry. Just as we hope every member of our congregation will make a financial pledge, whether big or small, as a basic spiritual practice, I also believe every member of our congregation should strongly consider participating in one or more of our ministry groups at Incarnation as a basic spiritual practice.

But frankly, it's also a good idea to cap it. Depending on your life situation it might make sense to participate in one or two ministries here at Incarnation, maybe even three or four, but it probably shouldn't be seven or eight. It is better to do less and do it with an open heart and spirit and the ability to discover God in surprising ways than to cram more church activities into one's life in an anxious effort to be good enough in the eyes of God or people.

After all, we can't earn our way into God's love, and there are no bonus trophies in God's realm. There is only pure, abundant life and love more than we can imagine, more than we could ever run out of, filling our cup and running over. If we think that's something we can earn, we're fooling ourselves, and if we think we know who doesn't deserve it as much as we do, we're preparing ourselves to be surprised.

So with those things in mind: come enjoy our Ministry Fair. Find out about something new. Sign up. Serve with joy.