

Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon 9.16.2023

The Heart of Being Church: Part 1

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Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, we find ourselves called to your work because you are a gracious and just God who wants us to thrive. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

This is the second in a two-part series "The Heart of Being Church". Last week we discussed the importance of practicing forgiveness not just individually but towards one another as a community of faith when we looked at "The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant." In this Matthew encouraged us to grow in our awareness of our indebted to God's incalculable blessings of grace, the need to pass this grace along, and how grace is anything but cheap.

Meantime I have still been trying to "land on my feet" after sabbatical and it's been a lot of work so I have been reading church jokes every day to lift my spirits. Here's one-

A cabbie picks up a nun. She gets into the cab, and the cab driver won't stop staring at her. She asks him why is he staring and he replies, "I have a question to ask you but I don't want to offend you." She answers, "My dear

son, you cannot offend me. When you're as old as I am and have been a nun as long as I have, you get a chance to see and hear just about everything. I'm sure that there's nothing you could say or ask that I would find offensive." "Well, I've always had a fantasy to have a nun kiss me." She responds, "Well, let's see what we can do about that: #1, you have to be single and #2 you must be Catholic." The cab driver is very excited and says, "Yes, I am single and I'm Catholic too!" "OK" the nun says "Pull over" He does and the nun fulfills his fantasy with a lavish kiss that would make anyone blush. But when they get back on the road, the cab driver starts crying. "My dear child, said the nun, why are you crying?" "Forgive me sister, but I have sinned. I lied, I must confess, I'm married and I'm Jewish." The nun says, "That's OK, my name is Gregory and I'm on my way to a Halloween party."

What I love about this joke is that the cabbie started with some assumptions and doesn't get what he expected. So too is our relationship with God; we start with some assumptions and we get the unexpected. This is especially true when we consider what the real payment is for our labors as a church and people of faith, where we to carry load, picking up where others have left off or starting the work anew.

Our scripture today is often read allegorically, viewing the hired hands brought in at different times of the day as the generations of Israel such as Adam, Moses, Abraham, and in the last hour- the Gentiles. Others have interpreted the early hired hands as the original disciples of Christ, which of course would mirror our scripture from last week for we learned that there were some significant disputed taking place among the disciples. The most

prominently dispute was what to do about those among them who were under-performing. Yet in both interpretations the generous owner of the vineyard is understood as God: God of the Old Testament or God from the New Testament manifest in Jesus Christ.

Just like last week, today's parable is written to a mixed congregation that included both long time Jewish Christians (who may have actually known Jesus in person) and others who had joined only recently, many of whom were Gentile converts. Remember, Gentiles were really anyone being any person of non-Jewish heritage. They represented a kaleidoscope of religious viewpoints and did not share a common language or understanding of the Torah- the first five books of what we call the Bible. It was as diverse a crowd as one could have imagined.

But regardless of their heritage or viewpoints, congregational unity or not, Matthew is bringing forth the perennial question between religious people who sacrifice their time and talents selflessly and those who appear to not have labored as long. In Matthew's vineyard, it was the "good" hard working people, that at the end of the day had the same question "what kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not?".

So, the real question was between faithful people, it was a beef with God. The real question it's for God, it's about God's nature, and what God gives us.

Out West, a cowboy was driving down a dirt road, his dog riding in back of the pickup truck, his faithful horse in the trailer behind. He failed to negotiate a curve and had a terrible accident.

Sometime later, a highway patrol officer came on the scene. An animal lover, he saw the horse first. Realizing the serious nature of its injuries, he drew his service revolver and put the animal out of his misery. He walked around the accident and found the dog, also hurt critically. He couldn't bear to hear it whine in pain, so he ended the dog's suffering as well.

Finally, he located the cowboy --who suffered multiple fractures--off in the weeds. "Hey, are you okay?" the cop asked. The cowboy took one look at the smoking revolver in the trooper's hand and quickly replied, "Never felt better!"

Maybe that is how we think of the church's requests for involvement, or even the role of God in holding us to account in our calling to serve as disciples: like a passerby that catches us in some compromised time who will only compound our misery or just do us in all together!

In John Calvin's writings he discusses the nature of Christian freedom, being a disciple, and says this: those who serve God only because they wish to avoid punishment or obtain payment so in a manner of a servant; whereas those who see working in Gods vineyard as a gift of labor without coercion, in the manner of offspring who love and wish to please the parent, are dedicated to the parents' work.

Calvin's commentary is theologically significant because it is through his language of relationship, we find the most harmonious way to live into our callings. Because we are in relationship with God and God with us: we see labor not as burden but as a gift which praises God. It's a way to show honor and mutuality. So, in the parable it is because of the vineyard owner's generosity that the laborers were given work in the first place, lest we forget that having work meant having life, and that not having no work, meant living deeply impoverished possibly leading to death.

There is a saying "Assumptions are planned resentments." Whenever we assume something, we set ourselves up for a possible disappointment or even worse, we set another person, place, or thing up as the object of our disappointment, anger or resentment.

One theologian, speaking about clergy and church members, says this about assumptions:

Many clergy struggle with parishioners who assume they (the clergy) know what is going on in their lives and who are hurt and angry when clergy do not respond as the parishioners assume they should. It would be wonderful if these were the only assumptions we made, including about our clergy:

- God loves me and all creation deeply and profoundly
- I and all others are made in the image of God
- Gods' generosity is beyond our wildest imagination
- There is nothing I can do to earn or deserve God's generosity

How different our lives would be if we lived from those assumptions! To seek faithful discipleship without our hidden planned resentments.

How different our understanding of God would be as well if we started from such a place of gratitude and praise. Matthew has our number, because the real dispute in the parable today is clearly between those who were hired first and worked the longest- and the owner. Its between those of us who have faithfully participated year after year and our faithful and just God who continually places a calling upon our hearts. The most painful dispute is between those of us who endlessly wrestle with forgiveness, selflessly offer our talents, strain our budgets to be financially generous, participate tirelessly in civic engagement, take on roles we don't feel qualified for or fully comprehend, and then fail to receive the payment we so thoroughly believe is OURS.

What is unusual about the landowner in this parable is that he went to the market to find people waiting for work again, and again, and again. Early morning, 9 o'clock, noon, and 3 o'clock. One scholar says "We expect the owner to hire all the laborers in the morning. The feel of the parable is that he hires the laborer's later in the day not because he needs them (to complete the work) but simply because they are there."

Then our parable stages this payment sequence which heightens the hearers' questions about justice and fair wage, culminating in the question: These last few worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. How dare you!

And God confidently, and justly replies:

‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

This summer I journeyed to Connecticut to be with John Phillip Newell, a teacher of Celtic spirituality. And I think Celtic spirituality has a way to re-frame much of our understanding of self and God, and in this case, even deepen this metaphor of vineyard.

Newell share this with us today-

In Celtic spirituality the cross is the greatest showing of God. It discloses the first and deepest impulse of Gods self-giving. It reveals that everything God does is a pouring out of love, a shared lifeblood. And so, the whole of creation is an ongoing offering of self, a showing of the Eternal Heart that is pulsing with love in the life of all things. Not only does the cross disclose love, but it also discloses the cost of love. To offer the heart is to offer the self. And so, the cross, in addition to being a revelation of the nature of God, is a revelation of our true nature, made in the image of God. It reveals that we come closest to our true self when we pour ourselves out in love to one another, when we give our heart and thus the whole of our being. – J. Phillip Newell “Christ of the Celts”

The labor of the cross is tiring, its fatiguing for we are finite beings who must measure and meter out our time and energy- carefully. It's easy to assume that because we have worked tirelessly under our own efforts, we have earned more than another in the eyes of God. Perhaps somehow God is indebted more heavily to us. But God doesn't reward us for our efforts, God's grace is not a payment for contracted work; when God keeps Gods promises made to us to bring us life and life in abundance, this is the natural outpouring of God's just grace flowing freely to all creation.

God economy of Grace is unusual. It's all out of sequence. It's not for the faint of heart because of Gods infinite goodness- it appears terribly reckless.

John Newell goes on to describe Christ in the terms of a lover, intimate, one that awakens a sense of union deep within ourselves, as intertwined and as passionate a kiss itself. God's love- the mortal kiss of Christ.

'Are you envious because I am generous?' asks our intimate, loving God.

'Are you envious because I am generous?' asks our God whom cannot be measured or quantified, who does not grow weary or faint, whom is beyond time, and has no need for payment or for debt? God, who recklessly is pouring out love, a shared lifeblood, an Eternal Heart that is pulsing and coursing with nutrients for all living things.

Interestingly, in the end, envy, the envy of those who worked longer becomes more important than the original gift itself. Envy caused the



faithful workers to diminish the value of the gift of the day's wages. Envy robbed them and secretly robbed others of God's gift as well. In the moment, Envy can rob us of gratitude and distort who God is. Envy is the great thief of joyful praise and joyful living in Christ.

Envy asks questions like:

"What kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not?"

And a heart intimately intertwined with the Living Christ responds:

Our God. Our God would be so generous. Thank God, it's our God. Praise God, praise God, praise God.

May the work to which you are called, be the gift which is an outpouring of Christ himself. May the spirit give you the strength to carry on in your labors and the purity of heart to discard misleading assumptions. May your vineyard be filled with the joy of God's unusual justice. May we trust, even in fatigue and weariness, that God's generosity is beyond your wildest imagination.

The last will be first, and the first will be last. For the heart of being church means having a heart full of forgiveness and praise.

Amen.