

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20A
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.

Just before the reading in today's Gospel,
Jesus has just been asked by a young man of means
what he has to do if he wants to go to heaven,
and Jesus tells this rich guy to sell all he has and give it to the poor and come follow Jesus.
Of course, he doesn't: what sense would that make?
And then Jesus turns around and tells this story.

A landowner goes out to hire help for his vineyard.
He hires a bunch at the beginning of the day
and they agree to work for the daily wage.
The landowner then is out around nine o'clock
and finds more laborers and hires them.
He's out again at noon and hires more.
The landowner finds even more laborers at 3 p.m. and then at 5 p.m., and they all go into
the fields and work.

When it comes time for the workers to be paid,
the landowner pays first the ones he hired last,
and not only that, but he pays them for an entire day's work.
The ones who worked all day figure they'll get more,
but they're torqued
when it turns out they get paid the amount they agreed to work for. Hey, I'd be a bit
perturbed myself.

Most of the people in the Bible Studies I've ever been in
felt miffed as well.
"It's not fair," I've been told.
The ones who worked less shouldn't be getting the same pay
as those who worked the whole day. It's not fair."

It's not, is it?

There are interpretations of these passage that say
that what Jesus is really talking about is the failure of the Jews
to accept him as the messiah.

This interpretation says that the "chosen people" are miffed
because those who have joined the faithful over time,
shouldn't receive the same benefits
as those who were on the wilderness journey.
And that goes double for the Gentiles.

Another interpretation says that Jesus is talking about salvation.
In this interpretation Jesus is saying
that it doesn't matter at what point in your life you come to faith,
it's all good – even the deathbed conversion.
And people say that isn't fair either
– living a life of sin and self-indulgence
only to be saved at the last minute. Really?

These interpretations are as valid as any.
God is deep. The Gospels are deep.
There are no simple answers.
That's why I struggled with this lesson all week long.
I struggled because I see Jesus as an imminently practical man.
I struggled because every few days I drive by the park
at Agua Fria and Sandoval streets in Santa Fe,
and I see day laborers waiting for someone to hire them
to do a day's work.

Those are the same men who stood in the town that Jesus tells us of. Unskilled laborers.
(Pardon me for using the male word,
but in Jesus' time it would have been just men.)
Men who never learned a craft.
Men whose only marketable skill is their muscles.
And it is with these muscles
that these men seek to make enough money to feed their families.

In Jesus' story we don't know the details
of why some were seen and hired early,
and others weren't seen but hired later,
but I sense that Jesus is telling us
that the men are put to work as soon as they are available.

Imagine being in their place.
Imagine the anxiety on the walk to the market place,
wondering if you'll find work,
wondering if you'll earn enough to feed your family.
And imagine the relief when you're hired right off.

The weight has been lifted from your shoulders.

Imagine then, that you're not hired right away,
but you wait and worry, and time passes and others are hired,
and you worry more, because the day is passing
and you truly hope that you will find work, at least a little.
And that last hour comes, and you fret,
because you promised your children
that they wouldn't have to go to bed hungry tonight.
And wonder of wonders, you're hired for one hour of work.

It's not fair, you feel, but who are you to argue. You tried.
You were there, too.
Maybe you were a few minutes late for the first hire.
And the second you were at the well getting a drink;
and the third, nature's call, and the fourth, you were so tired.
But then you were hired at the last.

It won't be much.
You and your wife may not eat tonight,
but the children will have something, no matter how small. Tomorrow, you'll be there early,
and work the whole day,
or hopefully at least half a day to feed your wife, too.
Such a gift she has been to you. And such children.

As the sun settles in for the night, you
go forward and are called to the front.
Unusual, you were hired last, so why are you being paid first.
No matter.
It will be so little, the line will go faster that way.

Imagine the surprise on this man's face
when he finds that the hour of work is repaid with a full day's wages.
Imagine the joy that he will be able to feed his family.
All those who worked this day,
no matter when they were hired
will receive what they need to feed those they love.

Generosity. That's what Jesus calls it.
Not to pay according to what's earned,
but to pay according to the need of those in our community.

There's that passage about not worrying about
what you are to eat or drink or what you are to wear,
and Jesus equating the lilies of the field to human life.
That doesn't quite work
when you're worrying about feeding your family.
But then we have those who followed the teachings of Jesus

in the Acts of the Apostles setting up communities
where they sold what they had and gave to the community,
and distribution was made according to the needs
of those in the community.

That would never work today.
But we do give to those who do care for others.
We give a portion of what God has given us
to ensure that families do not go hungry,
whether they live on the other side of the world
or here in New Mexico.

We give because Jesus Christ teaches us to share what we have
and to care enough to work for changes in our culture
that will make our country and the world
a place where children do not starve,
and mothers and fathers do not have to choose
who eats and who goes hungry.

May God give us the heart to be generous to those we love
and those around us, and may God bless us in all that you do.