

“Parables According to Matthew, part 8: Workers”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for August 6th 2017 (9th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 20: 1-16

Those of you who have been here the past few weeks may recall—and those of you who have not been here may find it of interest—that I have been trying to suggest that at least some of these parables...

...these parables, most of them, unique to Matthew’s Gospel...

...I have been trying to suggest that many of these parables work as well as they do, precisely because they present us with situations that we ought to find at least somewhat out of synch with our experience of the actual world in which we live. And so, I believe that we are meant to be made uneasy by the thought of a merchant who sells all of his pearls so that he can purchase just one pearl. And yes: we are meant to regard the fellow who sells all that he owns to purchase one field because of the treasure buried in that field...we are meant to think, “isn’t that a bit reckless?” And yes: we are meant to question whether a shepherd abandoning 99 sheep to find one sheep has really proceeded in a responsible way. In each of those instances, I believe the point of the parable hinges on the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven far transcends our experience of the kingdoms of this world. And so, while a human shepherd might not be justified abandoning the 99 for the sake of the one, the logic of the Kingdom and of its God tells us that God’s love will do precisely that if needed. And so, while in this world it might be high risk behavior to sell everything to purchase one field or one precious pearl, by the very different logic of the Kingdom, casting all of those other things aside makes perfect sense. That having been said!

The parable that has been placed before us this morning—the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard—exhibits that sort of perverse logic on steroids. And let me assure you that were a British Columbian employer to attempt to follow the model laid out in this parable...

...not only paying all of his employees with the identical wage regardless of how many hours they had put in, and then proceeded to justify that by saying—in effect—that it’s my money and I can do whatever I please with it...

...well: suffice it to say that a rather large army of labour lawyers would earn a pretty penny putting that employer in his place. The world doesn’t work that way; it’s not just that such employers are few and far-between, it’s that such employers would be shut down by the State almost as soon as they attempted to proceed in so unorthodox a manner. But here’s the thing...and this is precisely the thing Jesus with the telling of this parable is driving at!

The logic of the Kingdom of Heaven is not the same as the logic of the kingdoms of this world. Let me repeat that. The logic of the Kingdom of Heaven is not the same as the logic of the kingdoms of the world. And the difference pretty much boils down to one word: that word being “grace”. The logic of the Kingdom turns on the fact that no-

one can claim that they are entitled to entry on the basis of their labors on behalf of the Kingdom...no one can claim that they earned their way and that they, unlike others, had no need for grace in the midst of their journey to that blessed Kingdom. In short, the logic of the Kingdom is the logic of an invitation we cannot possibly hope to fashion for ourselves...the logic of a welcome we cannot possibly expect to provide for ourselves...the logic of a grace that gives us far more (infinitely more) than we could ever begin to ask or to imagine let alone deserve. But what we do need to do with that invitation, that welcome, and that grace is to open our hands and our hearts long enough to receive it...to receive it. To receive it with gratitude and humility. And yes:

I am reminded...reminded of a wonderful saying the preacher who baptised me 37 years ago, would sometimes insert into his sermons: especially when those sermons dealt with the topic of grace...dealt with the topic of God's unmatched grace. This preacher would remind his listeners that "our Lord told us that it is better to give than to receive...", but then—after a pregnant pause he would add: "...but it's also a whole lot easier!" Better to give than to receive...but also a whole lot easier.

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Ponder....ponder the fact that the great life-transitions we experience as we move through the decades, involve our capacity to give...and to receive. An infant child can give back very little other than a full diaper and a smile...although even that smile doesn't develop for a few months. They can only receive...and unless they receive, they will not survive. So much of the joy of growing up is the joy of being able to do more and more not only for oneself but for others...and part of the tension we experience both as adolescents and as those who have raised adolescents, is the tension of permitting that growing person to do more and more for themselves. They no longer need to be on the receiving end...at least not in ways so apparent. At the other end of the spectrum, part of the crisis of aging, is that we suddenly find ourselves—after 60 or more years of autonomy—having to rely more and more on others...learning all over again, how to be a gracious receiver of the kindness of friends and strangers alike. And that's hard...that's tough spiritual work, to learn that once again, we are on the receiving end.

And you know: it seems to me that this parable—this parable of those workers grumbling because they and their fellow laborers were paid according to the logic of grace rather than according to the logic of law...

...were paid according to the logic of generosity rather than according to the logic of entitlement...

...it seems to me that this parable rather perfectly illustrates Christ's saying about children: about how we will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven unless we receive it like a child: presumably with open hands and open hearts and a willingness to respond to the gift not by imagining that it was earned, but simply that it is a joy to have received it. Nor should we...

...nor should we overlook the extent to which this parable provides a perfect backdrop to both of the sacraments we will now celebrate. In the case of baptism, one of the chief rubrics for baptism is that no one is permitted to baptize themselves. Baptism is an act of grace conferred by God through the agency of the family of faith. Even an adult cannot do a self-baptism...and, in the case of an infant, the radical nature of the grace being offered is all the more apparent. We can only receive...and in time, through grace, we will hopefully learn to be grateful. As for this table—where bread and cup will be blessed and shared—these again are gifts for which we cannot take any of the credit. Oh yes: human hands fashioned the bread...and human ingenuity crafted the wine or in our case, the juice. But the grace of God's undying love offered to us in and through these simple gifts, that grace and that undying love is something of which we cannot even conceive let alone manufacture for ourselves. We can only receive...and we can only pray that we will learn, over time, to express our gratitude and in our humility in the very living of our lives. And yes!

As a first step...as a first step...we can begin by mastering the impulse that prompts us, like those workers in the vineyard, to make grumbling our default position as we move through life. This isn't a contest...this isn't a competition...and it is most definitely not an occasion for supposing we've contributed more than others and therefore deserve more than others. We are all in this together...youngest and oldest...wisest and most foolish...ignorant and learned...accomplished and still seeking to find their niche. In this together...children of grace one and all. Children of a grace which, mercifully, will not rest...will not cease from its labours...until all have been gathered home. The last and the first. The first and the last!

May it be so! In Jesus' name!! Amen!

Please pray with me.

Most Holy One...most gracious One:
we give you thanks for this day,
and for all the opportunities which will come to us this day!

Make us alert to those times when we have been blessed
and help us to respond with gratitude.

Make us alert to those times when we might be a blessing to others,
and help us to seize the moment as we seek to live this day rightly and well.

And provide a special blessing this day
for all who will enter the fellowship of faith
through the sacrament of baptism,
especially Penelope Jean and her family.

Strengthen and renew your church!

Enfold the world with your love,
and protect especially those who are most vulnerable
to the ravages of life's uncertainties
and human cruelty.

And yes, dear God: as the One who hears our prayers,
show us how we ourselves might be an answer
to at least some of the prayers
which we have prayed.
In Jesus' name!
Amen.