

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
24 September 2017

Scripture readings:

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

In my first parish which was in Hudson County, New Jersey, I remember there was a corner in the town called Cliffside Park which was the next county up in Bergen County which was one of the ten wealthiest counties in the United States. I remember the corner where Route 4 intersects Cliffside Park at the boulevard where every morning there were to be found a group of eight, ten or twelve men, obviously Mexicans or Central and South American people, who stood there and waited for work. White vans would come along early in the day and a hand would go up with two or three fingers, and two or three of them would jump in and be taken off for a day's labor until the end of the day when they would be brought back, having been paid in cash for their day's labor. That's how it went. I can't read the gospel for today without thinking of those guys.

Then as recently as last evening in a conversation with parishioners I heard concern about the deplorable situation locally for not having enough immigrants to do low-level labor because, according to the people with whom I was speaking, the folks born here just won't do it. Also this week I had discussion with a veteran who had gone to the veterans' hospital for care and was pleased for the care there but who complained to me about all of the other veterans in line waiting with him who were complaining about how poor the service was and how unhappy they were with what they were getting. Don't ask me about that stuff because I think any nation that requires military service of anybody should telephone those people every day and say, "*What do you need?*" But the veteran with whom I was speaking was appalled at how complaining and unhappy people were that care was being offered to them, although awkwardly.

And then we come upon this gospel story about what the kingdom of heaven is like. It doesn't take us long when we read these things to figure out that Jesus' sense of what the kingdom of God is like is very different from what we understand the world to be like here and now - and not only the world, the politics and the economies in which we live are very different from what Jesus' view of that is.

Have you ever bought a book for a quarter you never read? I picked one up - 1970. I read a couple pages because there's some underlining in there, but I never read the whole thing. I still can't. It's too dense. It's too thick. Reinhold Niebuhr on politics. Don't ever talk about religion and politics. There's nothing much left, is there? A theologian from Union Seminary in New York - my *Alma Mater*, at least for a year - talking on the basis of his experience of Europe and the United States in the 20s, 30s and 40s, talking about the technological revolution. This book was edited in the 50s. How's that for vision? A bit of a prophet - you'd better believe it! Struggling with understanding what happened in the world with Naziism, Marxism and even our sense of democracy. And there aren't easy answers, and nobody's always right all the time. There's more reading left to be done. I'll be glad to share the book with you if you want to see if you can deal with it easier than I can.

Not new problems. This is an issue two thousand years old that Jesus is talking about. And long before Jesus we read these extraordinarily astounding words which we sang at the end of the psalm text this morning. "*He gave his people the lands of the nations, and they took the fruit of others' toil, that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws.*" They took somebody else's land and property and blamed it on God. Shall we talk about the Middle East today?

And by sheer coincidence I picked up another book laying unread by another chair - documents of the United States since our beginning and there's a document written by Christopher Columbus to Ferdinand and Isabella explaining that he had found the land that God gave *them!*

Now it sounds like ancient history to us, but we live in the latter days of these senses of justice and economy, and they will always give us trouble. They will *always* give us trouble. So our job is never done, and our job as Christians, it seems to me, is to read what it is that Jesus understands and work at trying as faithful people to make that stuff square with our own lives, our own government, our own economy, our own politics,

our own way of life in the world today.

Well, Jesus says an astounding thing when he relates this parable: that the guy who gets in the van on the corner in Cliffside Park in the morning gets paid the same wage as the guy who gets picked up at 3 and 4 o'clock in the afternoon, and they're brought back at the same time. We know that's not fair. That's not our sense of valuing our labor. You work hard, you're paid well. You're careful with your money, you end up rich. Well, Jesus tells this extraordinary story of a landowner who has this vineyard which is growing fruit, God's own fruit, and he says to these guys: "*Go work; Go work.*" And they all agree to a day's wage. That's not the problem. They weren't hoodwinked into anything. The problem comes when they compare their incomes to each other and they attempt to believe that their value has something to do with what it was they were paid. Their sense was that they did something - they were good Christians. Let's put it that way. They obeyed the law. They did the right thing. They were nice to people who weren't nice. They helped old ladies across the street. They gave big gifts to the church. They never missed a mass. They were wonderful people, and therefore God owed them something because they obeyed - *so that the days of your life will be long upon the land which the Lord your God gives you...or which you steal from somebody else.* The law says you do it right, you get paid off for it. And Jesus tells this story and it turns out to be all upside down. It's a challenge to us and how we think. I think at the bottom of all of this is Jesus' attempt to answer what the kingdom of God is like. It's answered in terms of what our relationship with God is like, and then we'll have an understanding of what God's kingdom is like. And there's more than one way of looking at it, as we know. Those who are heavy on the law see it as, "*I'm good. Therefore, God is good to me.*"

"*I am so glad the hurricane missed me. I was good. What did **they** do wrong?*" That's pretty medieval thinking. You did something bad. You deserve it. Let's pray for those who are in trouble because we are not. We have to be careful with this stuff because there are times, friends, when you and I end up in situations which we are tempted to think are punishment from God, and we think that way because our theology - up until we encounter difficulty - invites us to think that way.

A young woman at the 8 o'clock mass today said to me, "*My father died when I was fourteen and for years I've been mad at God.*" Well, the kingdom of God is different from the way we think things work in our economies, in our politics, in our religions. Jesus says it doesn't work that way. Jesus says it's like if you are an employee of a loving creator who is God. What you believe is your contract for payment which is more for more work, bigger salaries for better behaviors, closer relationships because you've been around longer, pews with cushions in them because you've paid more. You know how all that stuff went in the past. Jesus says, "*You've made a mistake.*" Now in his day and age he was taking on the whole of religious constructs of his day. You had to sacrifice the right things, kill the right animals, pay the right money, wear the right clothes, you couldn't have two kinds of fabric, you had to wash your pots right. And all of that was religious behavior. Jesus said, "*I don't think so. I don't think religion has much to do with any of that kind of contractual relationship with God. That's the problem - a contract.*"

We talk glibly and happily about a covenant with the Almighty. We learn and study and teach - and should - the Ten Commandments. But the point of the Ten Commandments is they will help you live and they will help you have a happy life because it's just a simple matter of this is how it works in the world.

So a parent refuses to allow a child to put his finger in the outlet, not because the child doesn't want to experience that and the child is curious, but because that will kill the child. So the rule is you don't do that. That's not because I would be angry if you do that - I would be *heartbroken* if you do that! Can we imagine God relating to us in terms of the law that way? If you do that, that will break my heart. I'm not going to kill you for it. You'll kill *yourself!*

So Jesus says religious constructs need to be seen in a different way, and I think this is what he is suggesting: the kingdom of God is more like a person who loves us, who gives us a wage which is not earned. Even the people who worked in the vineyard for a whole day were spared the real hell of boredom for longer. Their gift *was* bigger! They had something to do which was creative and generative and useful and produced fruit, and they had a greater opportunity to do that for more and for longer. But in terms of how much God

loved those who worked in the vineyard, that “wage” is the same. If we’re going to make the mistake of seeing wages as how we value God’s love, then God says - in Jesus’ understanding of divine economy and the kingdom of God - each is loved fully and equally by God, not because of what each does or how long each has been there or how much work has been done or how much he or she has deserved. The gift is God’s gift to those who deserve, who think they deserve, and to those who do not deserve and who know they do not deserve. It seems to me that our job as Christians is to gather here regularly and practice the idea that we don’t deserve a blessed thing, but we have been recipients of a full day’s wage from a loving God who is not holding the law over our head in order to condemn us but offers us the law to help us stay alive and offers us unmitigated, sufficient, complete and entire divine love for no reason other than that you and I are daughters and sons of that creator God. And so is everyone else, even the Johnny-come-latelies, even the people we don’t like, even the people who are from elsewhere and have a different color and a different language and a different gender and a different culture and a different economy and a different politics. All are God’s children - fully, sufficiently and completely loved by this same creator who brings you and me into being.

So it’s not a matter of being good and getting paid off by God. It’s a matter of believing that God loves us that much. And we don’t really believe that, do we? It’s easier to believe that God doesn’t love me that much and then I have a right to get ticked off at God. I have a right to be angry with God because God doesn’t do it my way and God hasn’t met God’s part of God’s contract with me. It’s way different from a loving relationship which has boundaries, to be sure, but love without boundaries.

So Jesus takes the economy, politics, national understandings of ownership and property and all the rest of it and turns it on its head and reminds us that we are creatures. Everybody’s catechism is going to agree with this: All that we have and are is a gift from God. But we make the mistake of treating it as wages from God, as something we’ve earned. We make the mistake of saying God gives this to us and then we turn our theologies into something which looks like the psalm - *“And he gave his people the lands of the other nations, and they took the fruit of other’s toils, and that was so that they could keep God’s laws.”* We still do the same garbage today. We still try to sanctify our improprieties to make them religious, and we can’t if we listen to Jesus. Jesus’ message was so radical that the Church, the government, and society felt they had to do away with him because he thought that God loved him and everyone else in the world just the way the gospel says today - fully, completely, sufficiently and equally.

I remember asking my mother as a child (the second of four) which was her favorite. Now no kid asks that question unless he or she is pretty sure what the answer is or is supposed to be. I never got the answer I wanted. And we continue as religious people today to ask that question, and I think my mother learned her answer from God, and we need to, too. *“You are all my children. I love you equally.”*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.