

Hear what the Spirit is saying

Sunday Morning at St. Hugh's in Idyllwild, California

September 20, 2020 | Pentecost +16

Collect for Proper 20

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; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. ~BCP 234

Jonah 3:10–4:11 NRSV

The Lord teaches Jonah a lesson when the prophet is angry because God is merciful to the repentant pagan city that Jonah has gone to great trouble to denounce.

¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

^{4:1} But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴ And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

⁶ The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

⁹ But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” ¹⁰ Then the Lord said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Philippians 1:21-30 NRSV

The Lord teaches Jonah a lesson when the prophet is angry because God is merciful to the repentant pagan city that Jonah has gone to great trouble to denounce.

²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. ²⁵ Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶ so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well — ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16 NRSV

Our gospel is the story of the laborers in the vineyard, who are all paid the same wage despite their different hours of work.

[Jesus said to his disciples],¹ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.

¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they

received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ ¹³ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Psalm 145:1-8 BCP 733

Our Psalm Response is a hymn of praise to the Lord, who is mighty in deeds yet tender and compassionate.

- 1 I will exalt you, O God my King, *
and bless your Name for ever and ever.
- 2 Every day will I bless you * and praise your Name for ever and ever.
- 3 Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; *
there is no end to his greatness.
- 4 One generation shall praise your works to another *
and shall declare your power.
- 5 I will ponder the glorious splendor of your majesty *
and all your marvelous works.
- 6 They shall speak of the might of your wondrous acts, *
and I will tell of your greatness.
- 7 They shall publish the remembrance of your great goodness; *
they shall sing of your righteous deeds.
- 8 The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

MATTHEW 20:15-16



Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16. A theological perspective.

By Kathryn D. Blanchard, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Alma College, Alma, Michigan

Ancient theologians have read this passage allegorically, viewing those hired at different times of the day as representative of different generations of Israel, such as Adam, Moses, Abraham, and in the last hour, Gentiles. Others have interpreted the early workers as Christ’s original disciples (“Look, we have left everything and followed you,” Matt. 19:27) and the late comers as recent converts to Matthew’s congregation.¹ In either case, what is primarily at issue is whether God behaves justly, particularly toward Israel and the (Gentile) church. Another theological question has to do with human potential to earn merit, typically addressed in terms of faith and works.

Matthew writes for a mixed congregation that includes both longtime Jewish Christians (who may have known Jesus personally) and others who have joined only recently, many of whom are Gentile converts. Regardless of the particularities of Matthew’s own congregation, he speaks to the abiding question of God’s relationship to Israel, as well as the perennial struggle between religious people who see themselves as doing the lion’s share of God’s work and those who do not seem to carry their weight. (The parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11–32 expresses a similar conflict.) Hard-working, “good” people have always asked: what kind of God would offer the same reward to those who have earned it and those who have not?

The tradition has consistently answered: a just God. For this to be true, however, the workers must recognize the opportunity to work in the vineyard (whether it represents Israel, individual virtue, the church, or the cause of justice in the world) as a gift in itself. There is no room for human pride, since one’s only choice is either to answer the call to work in God’s kingdom, or to stand idle and waste one’s life altogether. God

¹ Manlio Simonetti, ed., Matthew 14–28, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 1b* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 106–12.

does not will that anyone's life should be wasted, so God extends the invitation indiscriminately and repeatedly, in order to gather as many as possible into the vineyard. God shows no partiality among persons (Rom. 2:11; Acts 10:34); all are equally deserving—or undeserving—of the opportunity to work, so the reward for all workers is equal as well.

Despite earthly appearances of inequality with regard to who has “earned” a greater or lesser reward (Jews/Gentiles, longtime workers/latecomers), this parable makes clear that there is radical equality before God. Reward comes not from each worker's individual merit, not from the quantity or even quality of their labor, but rather from the gracious covenant offered by the one doing the hiring. God promises and delivers but one reward for all—represented by a single denarius (basically enough for one's “daily bread,” Matt. 6:11).

The upshot is that God's people are (ideally) those who work in God's vineyard simply because it is the good thing to do, rather than because they hope to earn merit. The other lectionary texts designated for this week reveal that grumbling against God has been the pastime of God's people from the beginning (Exod., Jonah), but the Scriptures have consistently called God's people to readjust their lenses and view God's mercy as a gift (Pss.) of which they should strive to be worthy (Phil.).

Calvin's discussion of the second part of Christian freedom can shed some light here. Those who serve God only because they wish to avoid punishment or obtain payment do so in the manner of a servant; whereas those who see working in God's vineyard as a gift labor without coercion, in the manner of offspring who love and wish to please the parent, and are dedicated to the parent's work.² Those workers who feel they deserve better must be reminded of the master's generosity in letting them work at all.

The conclusion to this parable, that “the last will be first, and the first will be last” (v. 16), echoes other parables (e.g., Luke 18:9–14) and foreshadows Jesus' upcoming rant against holier-than-thou religious leaders in Matthew 23. The call here is to humility; it is an attempt to remind “those who now know the Gospel ... who imagine they can teach and govern the whole world, and therefore imagine they are the nearest to God and have devoured the Holy Spirit, bones and feathers,” that their greatness is relative.³ Those who are first in the world's eyes are not first

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 837 (3.19.5).

³ Martin Luther, “Sermon for Septuagesima Sunday,” in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. 1.1–2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 111.

in the eyes of God. Those who see themselves as the lowliest of all are the ones God will exalt on the last day (Matt. 23:12). Moreover, it is a reminder that all good things come from God, regardless of humans' ability to earn them (God "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous," Matt. 5:45).

God's people—both Israel and the new Israel—are those who work in the vineyards of justice from the moment they are called until the time for reward arrives. Some are specially blessed to hear the call early on; but if they experience this labor as a burden, the gift is lost on them. Others are blessed to hear the call just before it is too late; for them, the burden seems light and the reward comes before they grow weary. God's standards of justice and value are consistently presented in both the OT and NT as alien to human standards, but God's people are expected to behave according to these alien standards, neither demanding their rights nor begrudging others' good fortunes. There is of course potential for abuse of such teachings, perhaps to uphold an unjust status quo in which oppressed persons are admonished to wait patiently for their reward, while those in power maintain their "first" status. It is clear that a responsible theological reading of this parable tends toward radical equality in the church, in which all are equally near to receiving God's gracious reward.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 92–96.

Assumptions

How easily we can relate to the grumbling of the laborers who assumed that because they went into the vineyard early in the day, they would be paid more. Such dangerous assumptions can be in our closest relationships, within our work settings, within our congregations, within our national thinking. There is a saying, "Assumptions are planned resentments." Whenever we assume anything, we set ourselves up for possible disappointment or even worse, as we set the other person, place, or thing up as the object of our disappointment, anger, or resentment. ...It would be wonderful if these were the only assumptions we made:

- God loves me and all of creation deeply and profoundly.
- I and all others are made in the image of God.
- God's 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.

Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, (Retired Executive Director, The Centers for Christian Studies, Cathedral of All Souls, Asheville, North Carolina) in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 94