

19 Pentecost
21 September 2008
Church of the Savior - Episcopal
Orange City, Iowa
The Rev. Joe Dunne, Presiding
Dr. Donald Wacome, Lay Preaching

Jonah 3.10-4.11
Psalm 145.1-8
Philippians 1.21-27
Matthew 20.1-16

Get To Work!

SO THE LAST WILL BE FIRST, AND THE FIRST LAST. MATTHEW 20.16

It's a compelling vision: the lowly unsung good, truly deserving but of no account in this world, vindicated. The successful wicked, proud and wise in the world's ways, in the end cast down.

The truth will come out. Things will be set to rights. Everything will turn out the way it should; justice will be done: God will see to it. The last will be first, and the first will be last.

The faithful, obscure good, quietly doing God's work, unknown to the world but great in the kingdom of God will at last receive the honor due them. But those who have clawed their way to the top, raking in money, power and privilege, will see it turn to dust and ashes and, past all remonstrance, know they have wasted their lives.

I love the story in C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*; the damned can ride a bus from Hell to Heaven to take a look around and, if they choose to, stay. The narrator is getting a tour from his old Scot teacher when he sees:

All down one long aisle of the forest...the leafy branches had begun to tremble with dancing light...a procession was approaching, and the light came from the persons who composed it. First came the Spirits...who danced and scattered flowers...then, on the left and the right, at each side of the forest avenue, came youthful shapes, boys upon one hand, girls upon the other.

If I could remember their singing and write down the notes, no man who read that score would ever grow sick or old. Between them went musicians: and after these a lady in whose honour all this was being done. I cannot now remember whether she was naked or clothed. And only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face. "Is it...Is it?" I whispered to my guide. "Not at all" said he. "It's someone you'll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green." "She seems to be...well, a person of particular importance?" "Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things." The guide goes on to describe this woman's anonymous faithful life, explaining to the visitor from Hell how her small acts of grace and kindness were like stones thrown into a pool, the concentric waves spreading out further and further. "Who knows where it will end? Redeemed humanity is still young, it has hardly come to its full strength. But already there is joy enough in the little finger of a great saint such as yonder lady to waken all the dead things of the universe into life."

Great stuff. It lies at the heart of Christian faith: Jesus, despised, rejected, crucified, made least and last is revealed as the first, very God of very God, the Lord and Savior of all. It's the very fabric of our hope in God. Yet I don't think it has much *immediate* to do with Jesus' parable about the laborers in the vineyard, nor about what he means when he winds it up saying "*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*"

Our parable does not stand on its own. It continues a discussion that starts in Chapter 19: a rich young man all his life has scrupulously observed the law. He comes to Jesus, *just in case* there's something more he needs to do to deserve eternal life. When Jesus tells him to give away all he has to the poor and follow him, he goes away, unwilling to give up his wealth. Jesus comments about how hard it is for a man like this to enter the kingdom of heaven; in fact, it's impossible, like steering a camel through the eye of a needle. This astonishes the disciples: if someone like this can't make it, who can!? Jesus replies, "*For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible!*" (19.26). Jesus' answer makes Peter mad: "*Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?*" (19.27). I think that what gets to Peter is the idea that

God might miraculously save this privileged, self-righteous guy even though he refuses to make the kind of sacrifices Peter and the other disciples have made to be with Jesus. What's the point of throwing your lot in with Jesus if that rich jerk can play it safe, smugly enjoy the good things of this life, and still have salvation handed to him on a platter? He refuses Jesus' command to forsake all and follow him, yet in the end he lands in God's good graces right along with Jesus' long-suffering disciples? How can that be right? Jesus immediately assures Peter that he recognizes what his disciples have given up, and he promises that God is faithful and generous, eager richly to reward those who have given up so much for his sake. Jesus *seems* to be saying that people like that rich young man might be on top now, but when God's kingdom comes, the lowly who have followed Jesus will come out ahead. Rewards for the disciples. Comeuppance for the rich jerk. The first will be last, and the last first.

Peter would have been happy if Jesus had stopped right there, but he doesn't. (Jesus almost never stops where we want him to!) There's something crucial Peter doesn't get, something that subverts the tantalizing prospect of this desperately unfair world being set to rights.

Maybe we should first move the parable closer to home, say into the parking lot at *Home Depot* or *Menards*, where we see them, trying to be inconspicuous and visible at the same time, or to a street corner near a bodega in a seedy part of town. All men. Smoking and talking quietly, usually in Spanish. Playing cards. Reading the newspaper. Waiting and watching. Occasionally, a car drives up; there's a brief negotiation and one of them gets in the car and it drives off. The rest go back to waiting. It's the precarious life of the day laborer. Mostly undocumented. The pay, even for the highly skilled, way below market. Some days there's no work. On those days they and their families might not eat. If they get hurt on the job, tough

luck: no insurance. If an employer stiffes them, too bad; they're illegals, what can they do? They're lucky to get anything. Justice in any meaningful sense is a luxury they cannot afford. Yet even here, we can be sure how they would react if an employer paid someone hired at the last minute the same as someone who has put in a hard day's work. This is not the kind of story Peter wanted to hear. For the parable of the workers in the vineyard is of course not about the loyal, underpaid guy who uncomplainingly does most of the work and then inherits the vineyard in the end. It's about the guys too lazy or hung over to make it to the labor hall at the start of the workday coming out O.K. and the good guys being angry about it. Jesus rejects the good guys' reasonable anger and sharply rebukes Peter for objecting to the idea of the rich young man receiving what he does not deserve.

Jesus wants Peter to see himself in the disgruntled workers, and to lose the idea that God's generosity can be boxed in by human unworthiness. Let's admit it: this really is off putting. Conscientious folk that we are, we don't much like God playing fast and loose with what his creatures deserve. But Jesus insists that we see ourselves in those tired workers, bitching at the landowner's carelessness about who deserves what. As long as we've kept company with Jesus, we're still invested in the old economy of fairness and still nurture the vain hope in a God who will dispense justice, rather than pour out grace that overwhelms all calculations of human merit. We want to be like those early risers who had something they could put on the table to negotiate a fair day's pay with the master. We don't want to be like those bums called at the last minute, with nothing to rely on but hope in his reckless kindness. We want our little sum of worth recognized and rewarded; we don't want to be tossed in with those lazy lowlifes. But Jesus calls us to repent.

Sometimes, we get into the spirit of things, glorying with irreverent delight at the thumbing of the divine nose at the rules we hold sacred. Remember Chrysostom's sermon we read at each Easter Vigil, the one that amidst holy noise joyously welcomes everyone in gleeful indifference to who deserves what:

*And he who arrived only at the eleventh hour,
let him not be afraid by reason of his delay.
For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour,
as well as to him that toiled from the first.
To this one He gives, and upon another He bestows.*

The last word is that we cannot defeat God's love. God is just, but God's justice is nothing less than his commitment to saving the likes of us, even when he has to save us despite ourselves. In biblical terms, God's justice is his utter fidelity to his covenant, not the accounting that measures merit and dispenses desert. God's justice is the grace that's crashing down on everyone, the latecomers and the early arriving, the lazy and the toiling, the good and the bad. It's crazy to get bent out of shape about who gets what pay for picking the grapes when the best wine flows freely for all in God's kingdom. It's ridiculous to get up in arms about those latecomers getting a full day's pay for an hour's work because now the harvest is in and everyone—those who did the work as well as the freeloaders—is invited to the landowner's never ending party where there'll be too much fun for anyone even to think of settling old scores or to dream of keeping anyone out.

So let's take the advice St. Paul gave the Philippians: *live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel*. I know good Christian people have had a couple thousand years to turn this into its opposite, to get out of it something like: here are the rules you have to follow if you're *really* going to be on the receiving end of God's love. As tempting as that might be, it's a lost cause:

God is going to get his way and save the worst right along with the best. So why fight it? Let's laugh with the landowner at his little joke on all of us. Let's forgive as we are forgiven and follow God's example, giving up on keeping score. Why wouldn't we want to listen to Paul and live lives that make sense in light of the gospel? If Christianity is really true, anything else is just absurd. That's what he's talking about, not about duties or rules or conditions. Surely the fact that God will at last break the hardened hearts of the likes of Osama bin Laden is no reason not to want to be more like Sarah Smith of Golders Green. God will relentlessly show his mercy even to the ungrateful and that is all the more reason for us to live joyful lives of gratitude; it's no reason to be a miserable ingrate. Sure, at the end of the day we'll all get all the 'pay' we can possibly use, but why waste the day idling about when there's interesting and worthwhile things to be done in the Lord's vineyards? Maybe that vineyard will turn out to be some unlikely place like the *Home Depot* parking lot, where those guys could use some help getting a better deal. Maybe it's somewhere else. But the owner, whose generosity knows no limit, is here, saying, "Let's go to work!"

Amen

