

Sermon for Sunday 20 September 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20 :1-16
« Grace »

This should be a good one!

God rescues the Hebrew children from Egyptian slavery, and they “complain, complain, complain.” Psalm 105 once again serves to remind us what happened, in case we ever forget. Philippians says suffering and struggle are standard fare; and Jesus tells a good story ... one of his kind ... a “parable,” we call them ...that we nod our heads to, and then slowly realize we are being talked about, described ... and I don’t mean flattered.

It sounds like every day’s news.

What would we do without the bad side?!

I can think of a hundred ways to get upset, or worry..

It’s all right on target ...and then, like the story of Jesus “asleep on the cushion” while the disciples watch the boat capsizing ... Remember the old song, “Carest thou not if we perish?!” with Jesus demonstrating, “ Peace, be still?”

For us, in this parable of the workers in the vineyard, it strikes home to be reminded we’re receiving the agreed-upon daily wage.

We protest: “But those others came @ 5 p.m., and they’re receiving the same as we!”

There’s something fundamentally human about wanting equality. Equal pay for equal work may not be perfect, but most of us can grow up into acceptance of that ...can’t we?

I almost got you a new preacher for this Sunday. This is Deaf Awareness Sunday, and the Reverend Leo Yates recorded a sermon, and I picked it up and was going to play it into the microphone so all of you, both here at church and at home on Conference Call, could hear it. Leo’s parents are Deaf. He can hear. Signing is his first language. He’s a gifted, thoughtful guy ... he was for awhile the pastor @ Christ Church for the Deaf, where Bethesda has been sending monthly non-perishable food donations for years; but I couldn’t figure out how to make the recording machine work, and by the time Charles was looking sadly through my window for a bulletin, I had to produce what you’re hearing now.

We may still work things out for next Sunday, or another ... but imagine what that means, to grow up with parents who don’t hear ... or to have a baby who can, when you can’t. It’s not fair. It’s beautiful, in this case ... but it’s not fair.

That's our religion, people of God. We do our best to foster equality. It's the fundamental precept behind any institution, or government, that's strong and healthy; but that's not what we hold fast to in the deepest sense.

What does the vineyard-owner say? "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 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.'

There is a perfect storm of complexities in Jesus. Start with being one of God's chosen people. When the Jews got that idea about themselves, how could it possibly mean they would avoid being either too proud, or too vulnerable? Then pass on into our own transformation of that image. We say we know the Son of God. That doesn't sound very fair to the Muslim, or the Buddhist, or the unbeliever.

We are groping at something far more than equality when we gather weekly to praise God and love one another. We are walking into a room with more than four walls. In this relationship we gradually develop more than five senses. We go inward, and we grow outward. Season by season, God being our helper, and we ourselves being loyal to the Voice within and the neighbor next to us, we are learning what real life means and brings.

We are suspended on more than our own legs. We breathe more than the air around us. It's not fair ... although, please God, you will find us on the picket lines and in the voting booths pushing for fair play and insisting on greater assistance for all genuine human needs.

But the wonder of it all, what sustains us and lifts us up, is more powerful than equal pay. This is a miracle. This whole living and dying in Christ Jesus is more than some formula or stock investment. We neither earn it, nor trade in it. We are alive, and that is all we know, and, as the poet says, all we need to know. Good works matter; but grace owns and runs us, and wonder overcomes complaining, every season.

I will say personally that all this time alone, and all these uncertainties we are living through, are rich with blessing and new understanding, for me. That by no means brings equality, or belittles the suffering all around, and at some point, within each of us; but "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" describes the love of God in Christ Jesus pretty closely. More and more, I am benefitting from letting go as well as holding on.

I don't say these things as final conclusions. As we walk together, I hope I can hear some of your own ideas, and we can respect different views and still grow in our individual ways. We have not only energy to work within this fellowship. We have tenderness.

It is a gift much needed, and beautiful in the sharing of it.

Grace. Amen.

