

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 24, 2017
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Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

If those words sound familiar, as if you just heard them read in our gospel this morning, good; that means you were paying attention. The thing is, though, unless you were paying attention to a ridiculous extent, you wouldn't have noticed that my opening words in this sermon were not exactly what we all heard in this morning's gospel. I didn't begin with the last verse of this morning's gospel (20:16), but rather with the last verse before this morning's gospel (19:30).

My point is for us to know that before Jesus wraps the parable up with words about the last being first and the first being last, he first introduces it with words about first being last and last being first. These perplexing and vexing words tell us he wants to turn the world as we know it upside down and inside out. Arguably, that's pretty much always the point of Jesus' parables.

Verna Dozier used to say that Jesus's parables teach us about God's "dream" for this world. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has picked up on her image. He's repeatedly said that Jesus came to change the world – and us – from the nightmare that life can often be into the dream God has intended for it – and for us – from the dawn of time.

But in the case of this parable about a generous landlord and grumbling laborers, it may not be immediately obvious which is the nightmare and which the dream. There is something in us that might just prefer our nightmare to Jesus' dream.

You see, the way the story's told, we know that the landowner is a stand-in for God. So we know we're supposed to take the landowner's side in the argument. But it's a hard side for most of us to take.

If any of us were in the sandals of those long-suffering, hard-working laborers, we'd probably feel pretty much the same as they did. After all, we all know a thing or two about the importance of being fair. If it wasn't born into us, we certainly learned it very early on.

I saw a very short clip from a sitcom called "Louie" this past week. Louie's a single father raising two girls. One of his girls comes into the kitchen, and she asks for a mango pop. Her dad says that there was only one. Her sister got it. But that doesn't go over very well. "It's not fair!" she complains ... repeatedly! Dad tries valiantly to help her cope – and I'll come back to that a bit later – but he pretty much loses the argument. That's how deep and uncompromising that sense of fairness is in us. ⁱ

I think Jesus' parable hits these same buttons in us, as well. It just doesn't seem fair to us that the landowner would pay those who worked all day, all through the heat of the day, no more than those who put in just one hour as the day began to cool. It makes no sense to us. But that's the world Jesus is trying to get us to long for.

If we're going to make any sense of it, I think we have to start where Jesus himself starts – with the landowner. Robert Capon, among others, says that the landowner is desperate for workers who can get his harvest in before winter, and inclement weather, sets in. ⁱⁱ

Maybe. But Jesus never says anything about the weather or why the landowner is so driven. Jesus simply tells us about this landowner who goes out first thing in the morning to hire laborers. And then again a few hours later. And again. And again. And again, one last time “at the eleventh hour.” (The Bible doesn't name time according to our hours of the day – nothing like 5 pm.) All we really know is that the landowner pretty clearly is desperate to hire laborers.

And I think we have to be a little careful not to read too much into the motives of those hired, as well, lest we miss the point. There's no hint that some of the laborers were more ambitious than others, some of them getting up early to be first in line to get hired at the crack of dawn while others slept in and have only themselves to blame. Indeed, when the landowner asks, at the eleventh hour, why they're not working, they say simply, “Because no one has hired us.”

And then, simply because no one else has hired them, the landowner in our parable does. If there's any reason given for the landowner to do what the landowner does in this parable, that's it. Their need for work is what drives the landowner to hire them.

And then they all get paid at the end of the day. And they all get paid the same: one denarius. It's translated for us this morning as “the usual daily wage.” That's not a lot; it's just enough to get by for another day.

Now if Jesus' story stopped there, we might think he's simply telling us that God, like the landowner, longs for everyone to have enough to get by. It's a bit like manna in the wilderness, enough for the people to travel together for another day. Or a bit like the prayer we pray all the time: “Give us this day our daily bread.” As far as it goes, maybe that's not bad.

But in his story, Jesus goes on to tell us about how the last-hired get paid first and the first-hired are paid only at the last. It's an echo of those vexing and perplexing words about the last being first and the first last, which tells me this must be the key moment (thematically) in this story.

It also sets up the story rather dramatically, as well. In the first place, it ensures that those who were hired first will see what's going on in this story. If they'd have been paid first, as would have been the logical way of doing things, they'd have taken their earnings and returned home to feed their families ... and been none the wiser. And everybody would have gone home happy that day, thrilled (in turn) that they were (each of them) going to survive another day.

But they're forced to wait. And that means they see the others get paid. That's the only reason it ever even occurs to them that the landowner is kind of squirrely. They've done the math. They think – assume really – they're going to be well paid ... they've calculated their relative worth!

And then, when they get paid merely what they'd first signed on for, they conclude they've been cheated. So they grumble and they complain. It all gets laid out on the table. They put it starkly in the end. "You made them equal to us," they say. (And if you don't hear an echo of 21st century America in that description, I'm not sure you've been paying attention.)ⁱⁱⁱ Even though they themselves were barely getting by, they don't want some second-class person to get the same that they got.

And then, once they've given voice to their complaint, it's possible for the landowner to respond. It must have broken the landowner's heart to have to argue that it was only right to make sure that everyone should at least have enough to get by for another day. It must have broken the landowner's heart to have to explain, but at least they could talk about it now.

Of course, it's a parable. Which means this is how Jesus is trying to get us to look at the world – to imagine it he sees it, as the dream God has for us and our world. And he's inviting us to see ourselves differently from how we were brought up to do. Instead of looking at the world and seeing all that is unfair, he invites us to see that there really is enough for all, but only when we share all that has been given us to share.

I mentioned that brief video clip from "Louie" a bit earlier and that conversation between the dad and his daughter. He tries to reason with her at one point, saying: "The only time you look into your neighbor's bowl is to make sure they have enough." The metaphor is lost on her, it seems; she doesn't get it. So he repeats himself: "The only time you look into your neighbor's bowl is to make sure they have enough." And he admonishes her further, adding: "You don't look into their bowl to make sure you have as much as them; you just want to make sure they have enough." She walks away unconvinced. And I'm not sure it really happened, but at least in my imagination, the scene ends with Louie softly banging his head against the wall. And that, too, might be a parable for today.

Jesus' parable tells us that God is longing for us all to look at everything a bit differently, longing for us to long for the world to be organized much differently. In other words, Jesus is hoping we'll want to join with him in imagining a world where the last are first-class citizens and the first are content to wait our turn, if that's what it takes for all of us to live together as God dreams we would be content to live. That's a world where it all gets turned upside down in order to be turned rightside up again – rightside up again if only for the first time.

ⁱ If you have three minutes, check it out @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAgdo6-GIcs>.

ⁱⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, in *The Parables of Judgment* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989), pp. 51 ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ We live in a nation of immigrants, and immigrants have come to this country for generations only to try to close the door behind them against the next wave of immigrants (a pattern that continues to our own times!). I think, too, of marriage equality and the objections raised by cis-gendered heterosexual folk who complain that LGBTQ folk want the same rights we've always enjoyed.