

Sermon for Trinity Church

Proper 20, 2023

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.

Most everyone I've ever known who has read this Bible passage has struggled with it. As hikers are known to say, we could say of this passage that you can go around it, even go over it, but you sure can't just walk through it. You can be confident that if Jesus told a story like this, he meant for it to sink in. But just what did he want us to see? What are we to know and believe and do?

There's been a couple of ways I've heard this passage preached, notable and to my mind, correct and on point. I've heard this passage preached as evidence of the desire of God that everyone, including Gentiles, be brought into God's household. Surely, the Jews were the first workers of the day, and those people who admired Jews, people called "God fearing," were the second group of workers. And last but not least? The Gentiles are brought into the household of God. I think that's got to be right. Key is, in that fashion the last will be first. However, in the end, it's not the only way to read this passage.

Another possible reading is that this is a story of the astonishing, super-abundant, overflowing grace of God. This is a God who knows no limits and who can provide for everyone, period. Come first, come last to the Kingdom of God, it doesn't matter, there's more than enough to go around. That certainly must be a good and right reading, don't you think? I sure do.

But there's still another reading that's not only filled with God's grace but with what we might call, God's revolutionary behavior. This is the God that we know in Jesus Christ who is perfectly able and committed to turning the world upside down.

I lived in Southern California for some years. Yes, if you're wondering, that SoCal, the one with the Beach Boys, swimsuits that boggle the mind, endless beaches and highways to match, and an economy of migrant labor. In truth, when I was growing up in Minnesota there was some migrant labor but not so much as to be commonly seen. But in SoCal, there's much migrant labor and the method of securing migrant work never ceased to surprise me. Every morning of nearly every day, a group of mostly men, would gather early at a spot well known to both those

who wanted work, and those who sought to hire them. A truck would pull up and someone would get out and start picking workers, and those workers would jump in the truck and off they went.

Let me be clear: this wasn't just a matter of choice; it was a matter of life and death for some. If you weren't chosen, your family could go hungry and failing to be chosen was a tragedy. I watched people who had not been selected sit for hours in the hot sun, hoping against hope to be chosen. You could see why they were not—too young, too old, too infirm, too, too, too.

I am not here to talk about the politics or economics of this process (though I will happily do so somewhere else) but I do want you to know that this story of Jesus remains alive into our time, two thousand years later. Now, I would like you to take this *Gospel* story and map it onto our time and on to people you might know. Picture that you've been waiting at the hiring spot, and that many others were chosen first but not you. Maybe you look like me and are too old? And then more employers come by and still more are selected until it's past noon and your spirit sinks. Not today, and no pay either. And then, suddenly, a truck pulls up, loads you on and off you go for even an hour of work. A miracle!

But that's not the end of the miracle—when it comes time to settle, the employer pays you exactly the same as the first people who were chosen. The first aren't happy, they even complain. But you, you remain in stunned wonder that someone would be so generous and kind. Your family will eat, you will rest, and your gratitude towards this employer will be boundless.

Knowing this parish and how sharp you all are, I know I don't have to connect the dots. This isn't just a story just about the Kingdom or religion, it also a story about salvation. No guessing here about the meaning, no surprises, this is a story about a God who loves absolutely everyone so much that the love of Christ alone is enough to promise salvation. So, please, raise your heads and lift your hopes, the God of love is looking for you. Amen.

The Rev. Jeffrey Bullock D.Min., D.D