

Proper 20 A The Generous Landowner and Grumbling Laborers

When asked about their favorite passage in Scripture, Christians have some predictable responses. The theologically-sophisticated and mystically-inclined love the beginning of the Gospel of John, with its affirmation that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us,

a passage that sets us up to see the world as a grace-bearing sacrament of God's presence.

Among those inclined to see the social meaning of the Gospel, it is Matthew 25 that will be remembered as a favorite passage.

People love its teaching that we love and serve Christ by loving and serving the people in deep need in our world.

Those who treasure the evangelical statement of Christian faith will point to John 3:16, the gospel in a nutshell, with its word that we are given eternal life, out of God's love, through the confession of Jesus Christ.

And some would point to the sermon on the mount and to the *blessed are* statements in it, as their most treasured passage in Scripture.

You know them; blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs will be the Kingdom of God.

Blessed are the reviled, for terrible things were said about the prophets in the past.

Those words of Jesus have often been claimed by us.

And not claimed as well, for frankly, our love of the words has not often been borne out in our lives.

Many of us prefer the bold to the meek. (The meek are awfully hard to get to know!)

We love the rich in spirit more than the poor in spirit;

indeed, we'd probably rather have rich friends than poor ones;

a happy friend rather than a depressed one.

We do not plan our days to spend more time with the reviled but rather with the respected and the approved.

We can call this human nature or sinful resistance or just our practical realism.

We are not naturally inclined to see the world and other human beings as Jesus would command us to do so,

though we love the words and maybe even the ideas he offers to us.

And we, our current generation, are not alone in this, though we may be some worse than those who went before.

Look at our brother Jonah, cast before us today.

What a sour, self-righteous prophet he had become by the end of the hilarious story of his misadventure to Nineveh.

Nineveh was indeed a nasty place, the Assyrian capital,

full of power in the worst way,

a nation that made war in order to enslave other nations and make them pay tribute.

But God wanted those reviled people to repent,
wanted them to be better than their king,
wanted to claim them for his purposes.

Jonah didn't want to preach repentance to them but ended up doing it anyway.

Today we hear him explain why he didn't want to; he knew,

he said, that God was gracious and forgiving,

and he didn't want the Ninevehites getting such a good deal out of God.

He couldn't stand the thought of them coming so late to the mercy of God,

after Israel's long faithfulness, after slavery in Egypt, desert wandering, and all the trouble of building a Temple.

Where were those Assyrians then?

The Lord's parable shows us similar characters,
irritated that someone else got a better deal, later in time.

Grumblers, those early laborers proved to be.

The earlier laborers had the satisfaction of knowing they had earned their wages;

the knowledge that they'd fulfilled their duty;

the privilege of being the first selected,

presumably because it appeared they were the best available,

there at the beginning of the day.

It is really an ugly moment, if you consider it,

people complaining that a fair deal was wrong because it was graciously extended to others,

others who may have been passed over all day long and for many days earlier,

because they were older,

weaker in body, disabled, or simply less known.

To complain about the generosity of one who extends mercy is a poor way to get through life.

So this parable is the beatitudes in story form.

It shows us a powerful figure treasuring the weak as much as the strong,

holding up the reviled alongside the respected,

making the poor the equivalent of the rich.

In it, Jesus seems to tell us that God is running the universe this way.

We, of course, are not running our world this way.

The finest kindergarten teacher in the country,

working with the most vulnerable students in some inner city or rural district for forty years will retire with a modest pension,

while a 23 year-old with a knowledge of the brokenness of human nature

and some knowledge of the internet can create a business worth billions,

so that we can see what each other made for supper and be jealous of each others vacations.

This parable takes us back to the initial teaching of Jesus and reminds us that we still are running the world the wrong way.

We are waiting for the Kingdom to come, when Jesus will help us (make us?) get it right.

We have, in the meantime, the prospect of being inspired by this generous landowner and our generous God in our life together.

Here is one way; is there someone new to the labor of this vineyard?

Eddie and Chris have been worshiping with us for several weeks; then there is Gary and Lyle.

Amy Alley has been bringing her fiancée Dan.

These later arrivers to our vineyard are terribly important, Jesus seems to be saying.

Find them, get to know them, ask them to help.

And here is another way, in giving.

We can't control the economy's decision that the men who keep the church's grounds

make less than the minister who preaches the sermons

who makes less than the accountants who listen to them

who make less than the CEO of their business.

We appear to be stuck with that.

But we can make a provisional move to right that ship by our giving.

Those to whom much has been given have much of an opportunity to give.

In a free society, we are not going to get paid by the terms of the parable,

but we can give in way that makes the world of the parable a little closer.

We are encouraged by the Scripture to give joyfully and many of us know how much fun it is to give and see things change for the better.

The joy of our church's life together is the fruit of such giving.

But let me close with a more challenging idea.

Giving is also a penitential practice.

It is our confession that the world isn't the way God hoped for it to be;

our confession that we don't know how to stop seeking riches;

that for some of us, life is nearly too good, our material comfort too great.

Our giving, when it is deep and sacrificial, signals that we wish for divine order that we are not capable of ourselves.

We hope for a world of divine and material blessing in which none is greater than any other,

as all are gathered to the Lord, who is no respecter of persons.

In such giving, we testify that the first will be last and the last will be first

and that all of our hope is in God,

who gives, freely and equally and who invites us to give as freely as we have received.