

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Beth Orling
September 24, 2023

Exodus 16:2-15

Psalms 105:1-6, 37-45

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA.

The Gospel

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘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.’ 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? 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.”

The Sermon

In the early months of the pandemic Terence Layne came to know real stress and fear. He and his co-workers, New York City bus drivers, were saving the city, getting people to dialysis and cancer treatments, getting hospital personnel to work. And yet ... Passengers coughed, someone threw a soup can at a driver, someone else spit on a driver, others cursed them. A splendid few thanked them. Over 100 drivers had already died from Covid. But the bus drivers kept showing up.

Although he had been raised to see the white man as the Devil, Layne felt good to see that half of the people in the demonstration he witnessed against the killing of George Floyd were white. He knew that half of his co-workers were white.

Pondering how to address the stress and low morale of his co-workers, Layne parked his bus at the end of his shift and created a video with these words, “Brothers and sisters, I want to thank you all for stepping up and coming to work today and showing what leadership looks like...If no one else thanks you, if no one else recognizes you, know that I do.”¹ These people came at the beginning of the day and worked to the end.

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“Love everyone!” we say. Great! But I want to say more. I want to mention loving bus drivers like Terence Layne, day-laborers who beg for a chance to work, the pan-handlers at our grocery stores, the people who languish in detention centers and prisons, the faithful essential workers trying to make do on minimum wage. Minority people, disabled people, people who struggle to read or to manage their lives.

These people are considered “last” in the eyes of many leaders of our communities and nation. Bus drivers and the people who ride the bus because they don’t have a car are considered “last”. Little kids and old people often fall into that category. So-called “dumb” animals and hundred-year-old trees are “lasts” because they are not human and can be used for making money by those who consider themselves the “firsts”.

We hear Jesus’ words, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” We struggle to regard all these “lasts” as Jesus’ suggests.

¹ “Survival Story” by Jennifer Gonnerman in The New Yorker, August 31, 2020, p. 49ff.

When I was in college, come Saturday night, if we didn't have dates, we'd sit around and have fun saying these words, "The last will be first and the first will be last." Seemed like it would be righteous payback for our complaints. Actually, one of the ring-leaders of that fun was one of the first of our group to marry and eventually to celebrate her 50th wedding anniversary.

So did Jesus tell this story to comfort the "lasts" of the world? Or to worry the "firsts"?

The story does feel unjust. If you were the ones who labored in the hot sun all day long and you got the same pay as the ones who worked for an hour, how would you feel? And how would you feel if you were the one who worked for an hour and got good pay for it?

In the story, the "firsts", who had worked all day, grumbled, much like the people of Israel saved from slavery but hungry in the desert. The Israelites complained not only against Moses and his brother Aaron, their leaders, but also against the Lord. "If only we had died ... in the land of Egypt ... when we ate our fill...."

What happened then? The strange food called "manna" appeared each morning and sustained the people; quail covered the camp and provided meat. Complaints were met by generosity.

St. John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, whose cathedral was the gorgeous Hagia Sophia in today's Istanbul, pondered this story from Matthew's Gospel. At Easter vigil we often hear his sermon based on it. In his day, back around the year 400, the Easter vigil was the time when newcomers to the faith or repentant lapsed believers were brought into or back into the community that shared the Eucharist. The "firsts" welcomed the "late-comers".

St. John talks about those who have paid the so-called dues of Lenten fasting and repentance – either a full-hearted or a half-hearted fast, or maybe an extremely minimal effort -- just as the workers in Jesus' story toiled either all or part of the day.

He said:

"Are there any weary with fasting? Let them now receive their wages!

If any have toiled from the first hour, let them receive their due reward;

If any have come after the third hour, let him with gratitude join in the Feast!
And [she] that arrived after the sixth hour, let [her] not doubt; for [she] too shall sustain no loss.

And if any delayed until the ninth hour, let him not hesitate; but let him come too.
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 [God] gives, and upon another [God] bestows.
[God] accepts the works as [God] greets the endeavor.
The deed [God] honors and the intention [God] commends.
Let us all enter into the joy of the Lord!

First and last alike receive your reward;
rich and poor, rejoice together!
Sober and slothful, celebrate the day!
You that have kept the fast, and you that have not,
rejoice today for the Table is richly laden!

Feast royally on it, the calf is a fatted one.
Let no one go away hungry. Partake, all, of the cup of faith.
Enjoy all the riches of [God's] goodness!

Let no one grieve at his poverty,
for the universal kingdom has been revealed.

Let no one mourn that [she] has fallen again and again;
for forgiveness has risen from the grave."

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Saint John Chrysostom took this Gospel to heart. He angered the wealthy and the powerful clergy because he refrained from giving lavish banquets. He befriended the poor.

He would have liked Terence Layne's words to his fellow bus-drivers: thank you for showing up. He would have helped clean up on Monday afternoons after our guests leave.

The words of today's Gospel along with St. John's words, can do nothing but give us joy and hope. This story is about God's generosity. For each of us is one of the "lasts" in coming to faith, even if we were cradle Episcopalians or ministers or workers for the kingdom all our lives. Those of us who literally came "last" to faith can take pleasure. The thief on the cross next to Jesus was a "last" and Jesus promised him paradise. We are all "lasts", and we are all seen through Jesus' eyes as "firsts." The story is about the mercy and regard of our Creator – in spite of our grumbling and complaints. Like the ancient manna from heaven, this mercy blesses us daily.

All of us and all of our brothers and sisters – regardless of who they are, how they live, where they work, how much money they earn, or if they pan-handle – are "firsts" in God's eyes. I wonder how it might be when we see all our sisters and brothers, and all of Creation, through God's eyes.

Grace upon grace abounds in this story and in the realm of heaven. Amen.