

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church Calgary by the Rev. Clara King, September 24, 2017.

Proper 25 – Year A

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is a fantastic Gospel reading – one of my all-time favourites. I love what it says to us about God's shocking and surprising grace: that it does not matter *when* we enter the kingdom, but only that we do.

It speaks to us about God's persistence: that God invites us not once, but again and again and again, always offering the same promises, the same incredible, endless love which longs for us, and which will never stop longing for us.

And it speaks of God's sacrifice: that the ultimate price was paid – not only for the best of us, but equally for all: all who are saved, all who come late to salvation, and even all who are yet to be saved. And it speaks to us also of our own jealousy against one another, and cautions us to be open-hearted.

It is a beautiful passage indeed; and how much more so when we realize that's only one way to read this passage! I'm grateful to Jewish New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine for suggesting a whole new way to read this passage, one that gives us a whole extra layer of meanings. She suggests that perhaps Jesus didn't tell this parable to teach us about the character of God – perhaps, he told this parable to teach us how we ought to treat one another. Perhaps, he wanted us to identify not only as the labourers, but in fact, to grow to be more like the Landlord, too.

Let us notice a few facts about this master and what he does: he goes out looking for labourers multiple times, and each time, he appears to hire every labourer he finds waiting there for work. He negotiates a specific price with the labourers he hires at the beginning of the day, but only says to the others, "I will pay you what is right" – actually the word here is, "I will pay you what is righteous". And he pays everyone the proper, standard daily wage, which was enough to feed a family for 2-3 days.

There's nothing that says this master needs all these labourers in his vineyard, yet he keeps hiring them. He hires them not because he needs their labour, but because they need his work, they need this income. He pays them not for the labour they've done for him, but rather he pays them the wage which will keep their families fed for another few days – since all families have an equal need to eat, whether the breadwinner starts work at 6, or 9 or noon or 5.

This master looks at his labourers as people, first and foremost, and he sees that they are all equal: what they need is equal, and their dignity is equal, regardless of when they arrived at the market, and what benefit they bring to the master.

But we are still so much like the other labourers! Like them, we calculate who has what, and who gave what, and who should be giving what, and who costs what. Just think of the immigration debate in this country. We are like the other labourers; Jesus calls us to think more like this master: to see everyone as equal.

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This parable strikes directly at the heart of how we dream of revitalizing this parish. When we started, we made a pitch to the Diocese that somehow aimed at financial self-sufficiency. We said, “we can grow this parish so it can stand on it's own two feet again!”

But that dream is based on a hidden expectation that each person who joins our church contributes to it financially at a certain level.

I say here and now, that is not the right way to run a church. We should not, secretly or publicly, defend a church-growth plan which might make us happier when people drive up in fancier cars; which might make me more likely to visit and care for parishioners who have more money; which might make us measure a person's clothes or jewellery when deciding how warmly to welcome them. I don't mean we'd ever do that intentionally – but how could we not come to find ourselves doing it accidentally?

But we are all equal in the eyes of God. We are all equally in need of grace, and equally in need of faith, and equally in need of compassion, rich or poor. Just as the workers in the vineyard were all equally in need of the daily wage to feed their families.

We, all of us, equally need one another, and the care and support we give one another, and the prayers by which we lift one another up.

For instance: we did not ask for a ministry of welcoming refugees, but God gave us this ministry anyway. If we welcome all the refugees this year that we are anticipating, and if they all, like Martha and her family, choose to join us here at St. George's in worship and in fellowship, our church will be much bigger; our church will be much richer – but we will not be very much wealthier.

If God were to build up our foodbank ministry into a vibrant and bustling ministry to the working poor in our neighbourhoods, or develop here a ministry to the addicted, or a ministry to the abused, it would make us much, much richer – *in spirit* - but it may well not make us wealthier.

And while we need to be wise stewards – while, believe me, we are practicing wise stewardship – we are also building a case: a case that St. George's revitalization should not be measured only by our bank account.

For we may become rich in spirit, rich in ministry, rich in our care for one another, and our compassionate outreach to those in need, rich in our faithfulness, and the resilience our faith gives each of us to live through dark and difficult times in our own lives – yes, we may become rich indeed, in many ways; we may do many things in the service of Christ and his kingdom – and still never be wealthy.

And yet, I'm sorry to say, wealth is one of the key ways this Diocese has historically measured success.

I say: *it is time that was changed*. It is time we give this Diocese an example of a church that is rich while not being wealthy, so that the wider Church can learn for good that *money isn't everything*.

For in the eyes of God, all are equal; all are valuable. We have no dollar value to our souls, and our faith calls us to minister equally to all, rich and poor. And our faith calls those who are richer to share with those who are not, so the work of the Gospel can continue.

Here at St. George's the Holy Spirit is at work, calling us to ministry for the sake of the Gospel. We have riches enough to say “here we are, Lord, send us!”; we have riches enough to welcome every person equally, a brother or sister in Christ, and to open our hearts to the Lord working in our midst.

May God bless us with *these* riches – may they be our treasured possession, that where this blessed treasure lie, their our hearts dwell also. **Amen.**