

17 Pentecost
September 24, 2023

Sermon by Deacon Steve Seibert

A man dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. "Here is the requirement for admission,' he says. "You tell me the good things you have done in your life. I will tell you how many points each is worth. Once your total adds up to 100, you're in. I'll even start you off with 25 points, to cover those good acts you may not remember. Most people get 20, but hey, you're an Episcopalian! How does the sound?"

"Great!" says the man. "So, I was an acolyte through high school and though I didn't attend church in college, my wife and I were regulars in attendance. I was even on our Mission Board at church." St. Peter says, "That's 3 for acolyting and 4 for attendance. Mission Board! God bless you. That's 8! You're up to 40!"

The man was disappointed "That's all? Okay, I was faithful to my wife for our entire marriage. And early on, we began tithing." St. Peter says, "Faithfulness is close to God's heart. 15 points. And you know how often Jesus spoke about our attitudes towards money, so that's 10. You're up to 65."

The man names raising their children, taking care of aging parents and other good works, raising his total to 76. Finally, his frustration breaks through. "This is impossible. Seems like the only way someone can get to heaven is through the love and mercy of Jesus!"

"Welcome to your eternal reward!" exclaims St. Peter.

All those jokes about arriving at the gates of heaven always play into our misguided thinking that at some level, we have to earn our way into the kingdom. We have to be worthy. Mother Teresa is more worthy than you. And you are definitely more worthy than me!

In today's reading, Jesus has just finished telling Peter and the disciples that their sacrifices will not go unnoticed or unrewarded. And while he does not say their work is unimportant, that passage concludes with Jesus saying, "But many that are first will be last, and the last, first." That statement seems to introduce today's gospel...

"For the kingdom of heaven is like..."

That is: What I am going to tell you reveals one aspect of the kingdom.
This is not how to run a vineyard.
This is not necessarily a good way to pay your help.
But rather: **"The kingdom of heaven is like..."**

The landowner goes out early in the morning - at daybreak - to hire workers at the rate of one denarius. If we start thinking this story is about vineyards, we will get caught up in how bad the

landowner is at estimating the help he needs. He's out at, let's say, 6 am. Then again at 9, again at noon, then 3 and finally 5-ish. Come on, does this guy have a clue? Jesus says, "**The kingdom of heaven is like...**"

Let's make the assumption that the landowner is God and we are the workers, laborers in the vineyard. Now it is the end of the workday, 12 hours later. Time to get paid, taking your earnings back home to your family. Where are you in this pay line? Where have you placed yourself? If you are in the last crew to the vineyard, you are probably pretty happy. Way more money than you expected. The joy on your face and your gratitude to the landowner are apparent to those still in line. If you came at 3 or even noon, you may be disappointed a little but yet you have gotten more than what you banked on. The 9 am group is showing some definite disappointment. Now come those who started at daybreak. The manager pays them.

They are angry.

I was speaking with our bishop several years ago. He told me of a young, successful woman who was attending the church where he served in Charlotte, NC. She wanted to know where he got that that story about the workers in the vineyard. He told her it came from the bible and that Jesus told that story. She told him that she didn't like that story. It made her angry. I get it. I have felt anger over this story. Yes, you guessed it. I saw – see? - myself as one of the early crew. So, this story feels so unfair. I mean, at least pay me and the early starters first. Don't create this unfulfilled expectation!

Not hard to segway from my reaction and that of the young woman back to the narrative. The "first in" "last paid" group's outrage against the landowner is captured in the phrase, "**You have made them equal to us.**" These workers who started last should get something, they think, but not the same as those who toiled all day. At some level, there is a pecking order they think.

"**You have made them equal to us.**" This phrase may just be the crux of this parable.

English law stated that a child traced their status through their father. A Virginia colonial law of 1662 made the child of enslaved woman, no matter the status of the father, a slave for life. Because, otherwise, **you have made them equal to us.**

Laws forbidding the teaching of reading to slaves were passed and enforced. Because otherwise, **you have made them equal to us.**

Women and Blacks in this and many countries had and in some cases still have very little legal standing or protections. Because otherwise, **you have made them equal to us.**

Institutions of higher learning outright refused or allowed only a tiny percentage of Blacks, Jews and women admission. Because otherwise, **you have made them equal to us.**

For decades, Blacks and Jews were not allowed to buy homes in more desirable neighborhoods. Because otherwise, **you have made them equal to us.**

Laws are being passed in this nation that seek to control or limit the telling the history of most Black people because if those stories are told, **you have made them equal to us.**

Our brothers and sisters who identify as LGBTQIA have been denied basic human rights guaranteed by our constitution. Because otherwise, **you have made them equal to us.**

Status, position, control – these conflicts have been going on since before Jesus told this parable. But let us remember, Jesus tells the parables to make us think and take the blinders of our eyes. The landowner does not react in anger. He has fulfilled his agreement with them and has chosen to reward everyone as though they had worked all day long. In a more literal translation, his last words to them are “Is your eye envious because I am generous?” The landowner is telling the workers that the workers need to take stock of themselves. Bringing that statement into the present, God is telling us we need to take stock of ourselves.

What else might we say about those **last** hired workers. The landowner wants to know why they have been “standing here idle all day”? Their reply is that no one has hired them. Even late in the day, they have hoped that they might be hired. They have made themselves available, keeping the faith. Is it possible that they are those ones who have been pushed to the margins of society. Despite making themselves available, they are almost the last to be employed. In paying them first, Jesus’ statement is fulfilled. “The last are made first”.

Let us also remember that this is a story that reveals something about the kingdom of Heaven. In our human condition we vacillate between thinking we are not worthy of being a part of the kingdom and thinking that if God is agreeable to letting everybody in, then our place in line is certainly ahead of them! Whoever our “them” is.

Jesus says, “But many that are first will be last, and the last first.”

Then “The kingdom of heaven is like...”

And “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

The currency in this story is the denarius. But I remind you that this is “**the kingdom of Heaven.**” In that kingdom, the currency is love, based not on gold but the sister standards of mercy and forgiveness. In this kingdom, we don’t have to qualify for anything. God loves us, unconditionally. So while the last workers are “paid” first, they receive no more than the first workers. Everyone is made whole in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The last shall be first and the first shall be last. There is a power in the kingdom of heaven that can turn things as we know them upside down. Depending where we are in society’s hierarchy, we may welcome those reversals or they may threaten us. Will we work to enable these changes or will we actively oppose them?

I say to you **and I say to myself** this parable is not news I should be angry about. Yes it speaks to the reversal of position and power but more than that, it speaks of God’s love for each of us. We who dole out forgiveness as though it was a diminishing resource think of God’s love in that

way. **It is not!** We are not competing with anyone for a finite resource. God's love is beyond reckoning.

Another reason I get resentful about this parable because I question myself, question my worth. Otherwise, why would I worry about somebody "getting ahead of me"? Perhaps you see that in yourself, too. Remember, Jesus died for you. You are of infinite worth.

I will close with a few quotes from the book **Everybody, Always** by Bob Goff.

God isn't in the business of punishing us; instead, God pursues us with love. God doesn't grimace at our failures; God delights in our attempts.

God has never looked in your mirror or mine and wished he saw someone else.

And finally *God isn't shaking his head in disapproval as we make our ways toward God. God has outstretched arms, welcoming us back home to him in love. I bet if we could hear what God is thinking, we'd hear God whispering, "You've got this. Just keep moving towards Me."*