

Equal in the Eyes of God

A sermon preached by Anne Carey at Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity, Vallejo, CA
September 18, 2011

Texts: Jonah 3:10 - 4:11
Phil 1:21-30
Mt 20:1-16

There are some words that cannot be said too many times. Some of them are "I love you." "Thank you." Even "I'm sorry." And to these I would add, "I am/We are so glad to see you." So I join all of you in welcoming Pastor Sandra as our interim pastor. You will be blessed by her presence, and Pastor Sandra, you will be blessed by this strong and faithful congregation. Alleluias all around! I also want to say thank you to all of you for the privilege of bringing the message for a few weeks. After today I will very happily relinquish this privilege to Pastor Sandra. I know that we all look forward to your leadership with much pleasure.

And now, let us pray.

Holy and loving God, may the words I am about to speak, and the thoughts and meditations in the hearts of all gathered here, be acceptable to you. Give us wisdom and freedom that we may sense the ways in which we may best live in this world where the last become first and the first become last. Amen.

I think you will agree that it's a sobering scene we have here. There's widespread unemployment. The gap between the have-mores and the have-nots is widening every year. People of modest means are being dispossessed from property ownership and going back to being renters. The society is obsessed with security, to be provided through the expansion of military might. And by and large, the religious leaders either are in collusion with the political authorities or are distracted by internal quarrels that muffle their prophetic voices. I am reminded of this lyric that Paul Simon gave to Leonard Bernstein for his great work, *Mass*:
"Half the people are stoned and the other half are waiting for the next election / Half the people

are drowned and the other half are swimming in the wrong direction." Sound familiar? Yes, I'm describing the social and political conditions in first-century Palestine.

We need to note that at this point in Matthew's narrative, Jesus is heading toward Jerusalem. In this setting that eerily resembles our current situation he begins to talk about some of the practical consequences of following him, on such topics as marriage, divorce, celibacy, children, social standing, privilege, and money. This quirky, puzzling parable is the climax of that set of teachings, and it comes just before one of those predictions of his about being arrested, condemned, tortured, killed -- and raised. So it might be pretty important and worth our attention.

Now we've heard quite a few parables from Matthew's gospel in this season after Pentecost, and we've talked before about the challenges of making sense out of these stories that are very sophisticated -- deceptively so because for the most part they are told about ordinary stuff (seeds, yeast, dirt, crops) and everyday people (farmers, housewives, sons and their fathers, bosses and their employees). At the same time, parables like the one we heard this morning are edgy, provocative in what they relate to us. They make us uncomfortable, they catch us off guard. And we wonder what in the world Jesus was trying to tell us in stories like these. What are we to make of such a peculiar compensation scheme for farmworkers?

Let's be honest: what we mainly think about this story is that it's so unfair. We're right in there with the workers that were first hired. Equal pay for equal work, right? So if that's right, then unequal pay for unequal work just naturally follows, doesn't it? You work harder, you work longer hours, you work under difficult conditions: doesn't all of that entitle you to a higher wage than what's paid to somebody who came in at the end? From each according to his ability, to each according to his work. It's only fair.

This is actually a great reading of the story, because it means that the parable is doing what it is supposed to do. It's disrupting our assumptions about how things should be. We're identifying with the workers who were there all day, and by golly, they -- we -- deserve a bigger reward. We're upset and we don't understand how somebody who just arrived could possibly deserve the same things that we've been promised and indeed have received. We're the long-timers, and we're probably not going to have kindly feelings toward the late-comers. We might even react like Jonah, highly annoyed because God changed God's mind about the destruction of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, Israel's greatest enemy and eventual conqueror. It's apparently just unbearable to him, and maybe to us, that even the hated "other" might be the beneficiary of divine grace and mercy. So we could do the Jonah thing and have a hissy fit, go off and sulk for a while, maybe even hold our breath until we turn blue. What's with this crazy vineyard owner anyway? This is the kind of behavior that could get a guy -- well -- crucified. Hmm. See what can happen with a parable?

Commenting on this passage, Luther said that the parable "abolishes all human merit," leaving God's goodness and mercy as the only measuring stick. If we can step back from our irritation with the landowner, we can see this story from Jesus as a profound challenge to the moral world of fairness, where the first are first and the last are last, dead last....or maybe even just dead. In the economy of God, that's intolerable, because the God we worship is a God of life, a God of love, and certainly for Lutherans a God of freedom. Do we find that divine freedom frightening, offensive, even scandalous? Does it upset our tidy calculus of rewards that match our efforts? Are we sure that God will agree with us in that calculus? Well, I have news for you, my friends: God is not a capitalist, and that's really good news for us, because in God's divine economy, we don't get what we deserve. We get way more. God's love is not a reward

for our good behavior. Really, it's the other way around: our good behavior comes as our response to God's love, grace, mercy, which do not discriminate among all God's creatures. How God regards you, or anybody else, is not up to you. Like the owner of the vineyard, God is free to be God, even to Ninevites, or last-arrived workers, or conservatives, or liberals, or Lutherans or Catholics or Muslims or, or, or -- you get the idea.

So the "kingdom of heaven" is like that vineyard owner, who refuses to increase his own profit at the expense of the hire hands and pays them all a living wage. Yes, he's about generosity, but even more, he's about equality in the economy of that vineyard. The "kingdom of heaven," the reign of God, is not a place, remember. The kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, is what happens when we begin to live in accordance with the way of God's love, the love that is for everybody, no exceptions, no asterisks.

Nadia Bolz-Weber pastors a Lutheran congregation in Denver called, I kid you not, the House For All Sinners and Saints. She's someone to pay attention to about these kinds of things. Nadia writes, "We mistakenly may think that the kingdom of God should follow our value system and also be powerful or impressive and shiny. But that's not what Jesus brings. He brings a kingdom ruled by the crucified one – populated by the unclean, and suffused with mercy rather than power. And it's always found in the unexpected." Really, I couldn't have said this better. The reign of God is always, always found in the unexpected.

We are living in a time and context so similar to that of Jesus. The prevailing values of our current reality as a nation might give us pause for thought. They seem to me to support the notion that the first will be first and gaining, and the last will be last, and losing, and finally dead. So let us not be surprised that God in Christ has a different take on things. Let's agree to at least forgive God for such indiscriminate love, for being crazy in love with all God's creatures, for the

scandal of equality and generosity, for the wideness of mercy that leads to a cross, an empty tomb, and the gift of the Holy Spirit to remind us of all of the above.

And then let us find the way, as the apostle Paul advises the Philippians, to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, which means, to live the mercy and compassion and love and justice and hope that are God's family values. From this strange parable, so counter to our current culture, we might glean some clues about the reign of God for us.

While pondering all this, with the Celebrate insert in front of me, I happened to notice that we are encouraged to commemorate Dag Hammarskjold today. Some of you will remember that name. He was the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, serving in that post from 1953 to 1961, when he died in a plane crash during a peace mission in the then-Republic of Congo. Hammarskjold wrote that from his Swedish Lutheran forebears, he had "inherited a belief that, in the very radical sense of the Gospels, all men were equals as children of God." For him, faith and work were intertwined, so that his service to the world was grounded in the ideals of equality, justice, and peace. Found with his body at the crash site were copies of the United Nations Charter, the New Testament, and the Book of Psalms. It is reported that he kept these three documents with him during his entire tenure at the UN.

So this week, ponder this and find your own ways of living into the reign of God, or the kingdom of heaven. In this parable, and in all the parables Jesus is suggesting how this reign, this kingdom might be enacted in the ordinary daily stuff of our living. Some of us might be moved to work for systemic change for worker justice. Some of us might examine how we use our own financial resources and consider uses that are different from prevailing practices. Some of us might reflect on how we speak of those with whom we don't share views on important matters, whatever they might happen to be. Who knows: some of us might become Secretary-

General of the United Nations! When you think and pray and talk about all this, the way becomes a little bit clearer. Look around for those signs of a world that God loves too much to leave it alone. And then go, and do! Amen.