

Cross-Eyed

Following last week's text about forgiveness, chapter 19 tells us, "When Jesus finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan." The journey toward Jerusalem has begun; we are getting closer to Holy Week. In fact, this appears to be, in Matthew, Jesus' last public teaching. After this, he gathers his disciples close as they head into Jerusalem. Just ahead of our text, a young man asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life. After reminding the man that the good life involves following the commandments, the man asks for more. Jesus tells him to sell all that he owns. The man goes away sad, but Peter has questions: "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus responds with an assurance that the disciples' sacrifice is significant, "But many who are first will be last. And many who are last will be first."¹ What follows is our passage for this morning, Matthew 20:1-16.

"It's not fair!" How many times have we heard this exclamation? How many times have I uttered it myself? This past week, the collective outrage was everywhere as we heard more details about the admissions scandal involving coaches, parents, and admissions offices around the nation. People who already hold an extraordinary amount of privilege used extreme means to get their children into elite colleges. It is not fair, nor is it just. Nor is it new.

As this morning's parable reminds us, the debate about what is right and what is done is a story for the ages. On the heels of Peter's concern that those who have left everything behind to follow him, Jesus suggests that the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who needs workers to help in his vineyard. He goes early in the morning to the place where the day laborers congregate and makes agreements with a first round of workers for his fields. They agree to a denarius, a typical wage for a day's worth of work, a living wage that can sustain a family. The landowner returns at 9 in the morning, at noon, and at 3 and 5 in the afternoon. He asks the workers who are waiting why they are standing around "without work," as the Greek actually reads.² They respond, "Because no one has hired us." Not, "We didn't feel like working." Not, "We were hoping for a handout." But, "No one hired us." Scholar Amy-Jill Levine wonders about those who were not part of the first group. She notes that we do not know if they have been

¹ Matthew 19:30, Common English Bible

² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014) 225.

there all day. She wonders if some arrive late because they are taking care of children or elderly parents, or if they worked another job first, or maybe even walked from another town where there was no work to be had.³

In the end, of course all of the workers are paid the same amount, one denarius, and the workers who worked all day are quick to grumble and protest, “It’s not fair.” The landowner pushes back:

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?⁴

He has a point, right? He and they agreed to a wage when he hired them. When he hired the others he agreed to pay them what was right. The catch is that what the landowner thinks is right and what the first workers think is right is not the same.

I have often heard it said that this text is talking about those who are late comers in following Jesus, those who make the deathbed confessions and get a ticket to heaven along with the ones like many us who have worked in the church kitchen for decades, have plowed the snow in the church parking lot in sub-freezing temperatures since before time began, and have been tithing for centuries. Yes, it’s true that this text could have something to say to those of us who have been singing “Jesus Loves Me” since before we could walk and our relationship with those who arrive a bit later, but I’m not sure that is *all* this parable is concerned with. Dr. Levine insists that “Jesus was more interested in how we love our neighbor than how we get into heaven.”⁵ And we keep hearing that the kingdom of heaven has something to say about life *on earth*, too, so what might Jesus be saying *here* about the here and now?

When the landowner confronts those who are grumbling about the latecomers’ earning the exact same amount as they did, our translation speaks of resentment: “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?”⁶ The phrase could be translated literally: “Is your eye evil because I am good?” Dr. Tom Long says:

This ‘evil eye’ language takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus described the eye as a symbol for the spirit of the whole person. In the ancient world...the eye was considered to be a source of

³ Levine 226.

⁴ Matthew 20:13-15

⁵ Levine, 215.

⁶ Matthew 20:15, CEB

light that illumined reality. So, the critical issue is what one sees. ‘If one’s eye is healthy—that is, if one essentially has a generous spirit and sees the world in a benevolent light—then one’s total life will be abounding. On the other hand, if one basically sees the world in a pinched and selfish way, then one’s whole existence, even acts of apparent charity, will be begrudging.’⁷

Or, as my colleague Chris Tuttle hears the landowner asking, “What is it within you that is troubled by my generosity?” It’s a pointed question. What is it about the landowner’s decision makes the early workers go cross-eyed with resentment?

As we have said before, in Jesus the kingdom of heaven has come near. We pray each week that God’s will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven, asking God to correct our vision so we can see how that kingdom is taking root in the here and now. The workers who are hired late in the day are no less in need of a living wage than those who were hired early. The text gives us no reason to believe that the later hires are any less worthy or capable or willing to work. And in the landowner’s world, all will leave at the end of the day with a decent wage, enough to feed their family and keep a roof over their heads. Is Jesus suggesting that the kingdom of heaven might look something like a CEO’s being as concerned with her workers’ making a living wage as with her company’s profits and bottom line? Jesus is concerned with our inner life, and goodness knows it is safer to keep him there. We don’t always appreciate Jesus’ having opinions about our daily life outside of this place. But as he demonstrates time and again, Jesus is determined to keep showing up in the midst of things—even in the thick of those things we deem secular, those things we might think are none of Jesus’ business. Because you see he is awfully concerned with how we treat our neighbor, and how we live and move in the world. The truth is that Jesus makes all of life his business. If I try to box Jesus into an hour on Sundays and my devotional time in the mornings I risk missing the fullness of the gospel. And heaven knows Jesus will not stay put in any box anyway. The gospel of Matthew has been insisting from the beginning that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. This with-ness it seems is not only concerned with our prayer life but also with how we treat the orphan and the stranger and the immigrant, as well as employees and employers and customers and everyone else.

This past week I spent some time at my alma mater, Davidson College where the community is sorting through what it means to be a church-related institution in the 21st century. As alums who want to hold on to what is

⁷ Chris Tuttle citing Tom Long, *Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 74.

essential and right, we can get very concerned with the details. It did not take much for us to grow anxious, to look cross-eyed at one another when the anxiety took hold. And then in the midst of all the anxiety, Dr. John Kuykendall spoke. Dr. Kuykendall was president of the college while I was there. He has more degrees than I can count, and more importantly is one of the wisest and kindest men I have ever known. Instead of bringing in an outside speaker for graduation, Davidson's tradition is to have the president offer brief remarks. Apparently he offered the same message most years, but I confess I did not remember what he said on Mother's Day in 1991, so I was grateful that he offered his wisdom again on Wednesday night when I was paying closer attention. He said the one question he wants graduates to answer each day is, "What have you done today to help the world God loves?" It's such a simple question, but it is crucial to who we are and who we are called to be. It changed how I engaged the conversation about my little college, and it challenges how I see my role and the church's role in the world. In simple terms it reminds me that God does in fact love the world and that I, as one of God's beloved children am expected to work to make a difference in that world. It also changes how I hear this parable.

I am rarely the worker in the marketplace, and I am quite often in a position of privilege akin to that of the landowner. I have power, resources, and a voice, as does the church. I am struck by the idea that the landowner does not simply hang out in the vineyard. Instead he keeps going back to the marketplace. Can he really need more workers, especially as the shadows grow longer? Yes, we can understand this as an image of God, our determined Savior who keeps coming and keeps inviting. But what if it is also a glimpse of who God calls *us* to be in his name? What if God is trying to correct our vision, enabling us to see the world through the eyes of the one who goes to the cross? What if God is calling us to be a cross-eyed in a different way? What might it mean for the church to view the world—the world God so dearly loves—the way the crucified one does? What might it look like for the church to leave the vineyard, to leave the safety of the box we are tempted to build not only around Jesus but around ourselves? What would it look like for us to head out to the marketplace not just once, but over and over again in his name? What might it look like for us to let go of our resentments? What if we began to act instead like this scandalous landowner, doing what we can to help this world God loves and everyone in it—*everyone*—have enough—enough work, enough food, enough safety, enough freedom, enough love, *enough* period? We might just find ourselves going cross-eyed, in the very best way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.