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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A22 Filmed (9-17-20)
16 Pentecost (Proper 20A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist
Sunday 20 September 2020 Stewardship Sunday

Exodus 16:2-15
Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

Forgiveness and the Eleventh Hour

"Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ..." (Philippians 1).

1. Last month I was on sabbatical. It was such a privilege to spend every day just drawing closer to God. I prayed. I studied Hebrew. I finished reading the theologian Karl Barth's largest work Church Dogmatics. I surfed with whales, dolphins, seals and sea lion pups. For the first time in my life I really started making food. First brown bread, bran muffins and then a kind of fermented sweet tea called Kombucha.

Then on Monday morning we had a terrible accident. I misjudged the amount of sugar in the watermelon juice that I used to flavor my kombucha and one of the thick glass bottles exploded over night. Early in the morning my wife Heidi came down to find sticky watermelon kombucha and shards of glass all over the kitchen. In order to serve the remaining bottles in the batch I have to gently unscrew the cap and let the bottle fizz in the sink for twenty minutes before pouring it into a glass.

Similarly the pressure in us seems to be reaching unbearable proportions: the COVID pandemic, an unfolding economic disaster, persistent social problems such as racism, anxiety about the upcoming election, not to mention challenges in our individual lives that are unique to us. Through his presence and stories Jesus helps to unscrew the lid a little. He helps to relieve the pressure so that we can live more like the children of God we were made to be.

2. The Nineteenth century German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831) tries to find some way to build a bridge between the objective and subjective, between what we experience as fact and the way we make sense of, and value our experience. Jesus also understands that there is an irreducibly subjective element to our existence. He tries to help us see the world with new eyes.

The parable Jesus shares with us is so carefully crafted to show who God is, who we are and more importantly what we might be. He introduces us to the kingdom of heaven which is drawing near. This episode comes at a time of terrible tension in Jesus' own life as the last parable in his public ministry before he enters Jerusalem where he will be killed.

The word for the head of a household is oikodespotes. Matthew also uses this word when he writes, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt. 13:52).¹ Jesus is referring to a patient, wise and generous authority.

It is hard to plan in advance when you need help harvesting grapes. It is a little like brewing Kombucha (except without the explosions). Every day the householder has to taste the grapes to see if the sugar content has reached the correct level. This will give him a sense for how many workers he will need that morning.²

The householder goes out to the market to hire laborers at dawn, nine, noon, three and five. With the first group he agrees to pay the usual daily wage. Then at the end of the day he pays them exactly the same amount but gives the wage to them in reverse order so that those who worked the longest see exactly how much everyone else is getting.

3. We feel so sympathetic to the long working laborers. They grumble that compared to those hired at five in the afternoon they have, "borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (Mt. 20). Last week with the Apostle Peter we imagined ourselves in the situation of the forgiver rather than as the one needing forgiveness. Today we see ourselves as the workers who have been there the longest.

This makes sense. It is human nature to worship, to direct our lives according to a picture of what is valuable. The reformer John Calvin wrote that, "the human mind is a factory of idols." We cannot help ourselves. If we are not worshiping the real God we will make up false gods.

One of the most powerful gods in our time and place is the god of meritocracy. We believe that what you get should be entirely based on how hard you worked and how capable you are. The view that life is naturally like this has immense power over how we understand the people around us and on our own happiness.

National leaders like Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair constantly assume meritocracy. Barak Obama the president who personally I most closely identify with, has in 140 speeches repeated the statement, "You can make it if you try." Another example of the power of meritocracy is the offense we took at last year's college admissions scandal in which prominent wealthy Americans hired a consulting firm to help their children cheat in their application to selective colleges. Even in our conversations about race when we talk about white privilege there is lurking behind this the idea that our goal should be to get rid of racism so that there would be

a “level playing field” and competition would effectively determine who got the good things in society.³

It was only in 1958 that the British sociologist Michael Dunlop Young first coined the word in his book *The Rise of Meritocracy*.⁴ This satirical novel is a history about our present written in an imagined future (2033). In that world a merit-based system has created new elites who replaced the social classes of the 1950’s and created deep resentment in society (much like we experience now). Young hated the way the word “meritocracy” came into modern language without the negative connotations he intended for it.

My former professor at Harvard Michael Sandel has just written a book about how the idol of meritocracy subverts the greater good. He points out that there has never been anything like equality of opportunity. As a result, this way of thinking mostly just legitimates inequality. It merely provides a rationale for why some people have so much and others have nothing. Sandel also writes that it leads elites to look down on people working in jobs that are absolutely essential for society.

Schools and colleges exacerbate this dynamic. At Ivy League and other prestigious colleges there are more students from families in the wealthiest one percent than in the bottom fifty percent. Sandel says, “American higher education is more like an elevator in a building that most people enter from the top floor.” He suggests that after screening to be sure that applicants have reached a certain level, admissions at Harvard should just be random. Most of all he feels convinced that meritocracy causes real spiritual suffering writing, “A powerful meritocracy banishes all sense of gift or grace. It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes.”⁵ The inequality of esteem may be far more important than the inequality of wealth.

4. This all brings us back to Jesus’ unsettling story about the Realm of God. This parable has been designed to make a point. That meritocracy story, the ingrained idea that hard works should be rewarded is simply not the way God’s Kingdom works. God provides us not with rewards but gifts. And this should change how we experience everything.

The story is very subtle and perfectly suited to this time of public resentment. The early morning workers are not seeking more money for themselves. Strictly speaking they not are envious of the late workers in the sense that they don’t want something that the late workers have. Instead their grumbling has to do with scorn. They complain, “you have made them equal to us.” They want the late workers to have less than themselves. They

regard the late arrivals as less worthy. They hate the householder for erasing the hierarchy that their sense of identity depends on.⁶

The householder will simply not accept this logic. Our translation says "are you envious because I am generous," but this is a totally different sense than the Greek which has him asking, "is your eye evil?" Earlier in this gospel Jesus says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy (or literally if your eye is evil), your whole body will be full of darkness" (Mt. 6).

According to the householder the problem is with how the early workers see. They received exactly what they expected for the day but couldn't see that all their friends received so much more than expected. They see the world in "us versus them" terms rather than rejoicing in the "we" which has just received such a fabulously generous windfall.

They see only competition and status in God's vineyard of abundance and generosity.⁷ A story about their superiority has dimmed the lamps of their eyes so that they can only see rivals not comrades. Even the householder's exorbitant generosity becomes the occasion for division and resentment, a chance to look down on their brothers.

Jesus is not saying that hard work shouldn't be rewarded only that God's grace simply doesn't work like that. God's kingdom is based on generosity. Today as we celebrate stewardship Sunday we have the most practical way to experience this ourselves. We can make our annual gift to this cathedral and be generous in this way that helps us see beyond the us versus them.

I'm so grateful for the way that Jesus has loosened the cap of my life and helped me to see the world in a new more joyful way. Over time he is changing me in this way more than almost any other. I am becoming less concerned about getting what I deserve and much more capable of rejoicing when good things happen for other people.

Don't let the sense of gift or grace be banished from your life. Fully share our common fate as human beings. Together, hopeful, strong - be generous and rejoice in the generosity you have received from our father.

¹ Matthew Boulton, "Us and Them: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the sixteenth week after Pentecost," *SALT*, 15 September 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/14/us-and-them-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>

² Herman Waetjen, *Matthew's Theology of Fulfillment, Its Universality and Its Ethnicity* (NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017) 210-213.

³ Spencer Lee Lenfield, "No One Deserves a Spot at Harvard: Michael Sandel Makes the Case Against Meritocracy," *Harvard Magazine*, September-October 2020, 53, 56.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rise_of_the_Meritocracy

⁵ Cited in Spencer Lee Lenfield, "No One Deserves a Spot at Harvard: Michael Sandel Makes the Case Against Meritocracy," *Harvard Magazine*, September-October 2020, 54.

⁶ Matthew Boulton, "Us and Them: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the sixteenth week after Pentecost," *SALT*, 15 September 2020. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/9/14/us-and-them-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-sixteenth-week-after-pentecost>

⁷ They are like the public speaker who complains about following a someone with a good speech.