



If only... do not mind and do not be anxious. Familiar words from Scripture: do not be afraid.

When we rest in God and God's love for us, we do not need to be running "if only" scenarios in our mind or to be afraid because we do not see the "big picture" or we are anxious because our friend or co-worker receives more adulation for a job well done than we do.

Our lives are in God's hands and we can

rest, if not easily, than with some knowledge that we are precious to God even when the world seems to discount us as small or of little account.

At the Gathering Place, a gym associated with Greenwood Community Church, the posters proclaim: Are you willing to be loved by the one who loved you first? Do our own anxieties and our own immersion in the values of the world keep us from resting and finding comfort that God loves us.

The readings this morning from Exodus and from Matthew show us that God will go before us by day in the pillar of cloud and light our nights in the pillar of fire. God surrounds us. God provides food for the Israelites in doves and manna. God reminds us of the Sabbath by providing enough food on the sixth day that collecting it on the seventh is not needful. The Lord gave them food enough for the day.

While perhaps initially quite a different focus, the Gospel this morning does focus again on God's provision for us. Just like in Exodus, the reading from Matthew reminds us that "Gospel living is not about finding an easy way out."¹ We have to do our part: to gather doves and manna during the time in the wilderness and we have to work in the vineyard. The work itself is of value – it is not busy work but rather work that brings rewards: food for our bodies and fellowship for our souls. There are those who need our gifts and talents in order to more fully live into their own.

The Rev. Ken Kesselus² writes about our Gospel this morning:

How long have you been a member of this church? Or are you a first-timer? Look around. How long do you think those sitting near you have been members of this church? Somewhere in the crowd is someone who has been here the longest. And somewhere is someone who has been a member for the shortest amount of time. Those of us in small churches know who's who

¹ Collazo in *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 88.

²Today's sermon is largely taken from Rev. Kesselus and can be found at <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/08/29/15-pentecost-proper-20-a-2014/> (September 21, 2014)

and who's been here how long almost instinctively. Do you think those who have been members longer should have more benefits? More access to pastoral care? More influence with the vestry? Be first in line for pitch-ins? Of course these are rather shallow and silly questions.

But what if they were not? Wouldn't that cause us to understand better the sense of outrage expressed by the longer-serving laborers in today's gospel story who saw their treatment as a matter of unfairness? Can we fail to feel sympathy for those who worked the longest? These hired hands labored harder and longer and got the same pay. How can we not feel a painful sense of injustice?

Living in community, we inevitably have experiences that allow us to identify with the workers in today's gospel story, even if the situations are not as serious as economic and social injustice. We may well remember parents who gave up a great deal of time and energy coaching youth sports leagues or teaching Sunday School or leading scout troops, helping children of other parents who did not volunteer to do their fair share and did not even show up for important awards events because they had something "better" to do.

How many of us with siblings recall growing up feeling we had to do more than others in the family? How many first-borns eventually complain that their parents let younger brothers and sisters have more liberty than they had at the same age? Isn't it true that one of the first things we learn in life is to develop a view of what seems fair and what does not?

But one of the first things we learn from today's gospel reading is that Jesus didn't care much about fairness or unfairness in the way we tend to think about it. Jesus was not concerned about the ethics of business or labor management relations or who got to what place first. Through the story in today's gospel, Jesus turns our normal views upside down, shaking them out, so we can more clearly see the truth of God's values.

Jesus challenges our religious assumptions, affirming a radical understanding of God and our relationship with God that upsets our conventional theological views and the tenets of popular psychology. Jesus succeeds in shocking us out of our common misunderstandings of God, by affirming a deeper insight into the character and purposes of God.

We need to be shaken out of our usual self-understanding by opening us to a deeper awareness of ourselves, and to transform us more into the image of God. Jesus wants us to experience this parable as a way to learn what lies beyond viewing the events as simply unfair or fair and to catch a glimpse of the utter limitless generosity of God. Jesus wants us to understand that the worth of human beings is not measured by how much we earn or how well we perform or by any of our usual measures – status, popularity, social achievement, productivity, wealth, physical appearance.

Jesus wants us to know that our worth as human beings is absolutely affirmed by God, who guarantees our value as human beings – not because of anything we have done or can do – but because of God’s creative and life-affirming love for us. Jesus wants us to know that in the face of our limited, worldly understanding of what is fair and what is unfair, God works with a different reality, in a different direction, and by different standards.

God gives us chances to realize our potential – each in our unique way and empowered by our individual talents and gifts given to us by God to be used for God’s glory. Jesus wants us to know the overwhelming reality of God’s love in this world. Jesus especially wants us to recognize the power and presence of God in the life of each and every one of us. Jesus wants us to know that God calls us to respond positively to what has been given to us. We need to want to work in the vineyard with happy hearts and willing bodies.

Jesus wants us to know that working and serving in God’s world is a great privilege and opportunity. The reward for our service is the joy of knowing that we are part of a great adventure that gives meaning to our lives. The reward for serving others is found in knowing that we are part of a process of laboring to leave the world a little better than when we entered it.

In telling this parable of the laborers in the vineyard – the ones who worked different amounts for the same pay – Jesus wants us to know that God would have us concentrate on our own spiritual condition, not spending time and energy worrying about anybody else’s spiritual condition, and to accept our ultimate worth and our ultimate purpose without comparing our contributions to those of others.

Today we have heard Jesus turn one of our normal, worldly views upside down. In so doing, according to our faith, Jesus actually places those values right-side up. Today’s parable teaches that life is from God’s point of view, not a matter of fairness or unfairness as defined by our world. It is not a matter of deserving or undeserving. Through today’s parable, Jesus reminds us that whatever we have is, after all, a gift from God. Whatever we have is more than we deserve. God is overwhelmingly generous. It is enough that we have the profound privilege of laboring and serving in God’s vineyard.

This week I encourage you to ponder the readings for this Sunday and how they impact your lives and how you react when life seems unfair: “Assumptions are planned resentments.”³ Where do you, and where do I, let my assumptions morph into resentments because someone else receives more than I deem fair? Is it perhaps that God is working in God’s mysterious ways? Do I really have “not enough” or am I merely jealous and resentful because I want to be the star? Does God love me any less when another person receives a full days’ wages for an hour’s work? Or is God perhaps helping me to rejoice that there is work in the vineyard for all of us, regardless of when we begin working? The opportunity to work in the vineyard is a God-

³ Charlotte Cleghorn in Feasting on the Word, 94.

15 Pentecost (Proper 20)

September 21, 2014

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

given gift, after all, and we should rejoice in a God that seeks willing hands and hearts to show the love of God for all of creation. **Amen.**