

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, September 24, 2023

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Mattins and Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Phillipians 1:21-31; Matthew 20:1-16

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God's Generous Regard

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

We're missing a little context here for our Gospel reading this morning.

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus' call to forgive as we have been forgiven.

To live the mercy that God has shown us.

That's at the end of Matthew 18, but here we are at the beginning of Matthew 20.

And what happens in Matthew 19, is actually really important

To how we're to understand Matthew 20.

So in brief, here it is: the Matthew 19 Cliffs Notes:

The Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce: is it lawful, and Jesus, in typical Jesus fashion

Redirects the Pharisees to consider what *marriage* is or ought to be, not divorce—

Jesus knows that, in his day, a man was able to divorce his wife for pretty much any reason

And this had the effect of disenfranchising the wife completely,

Often making her destitute because of the loss of any real economic support,

Particularly if she had no living male relatives who would take her in,

Risking public shame in doing so.

Jesus suggests: if your idea of marriage

Is that one spouse has the permission to treat another as if they're disposable,

Human garbage, simply on account of the gender of the spouse

Then you don't understand marriage. First get fidelity, faithfulness, love right,

And you'll discover that those things are largely incompatible

With the unjust patriarchal power dynamics

You're attempting to defend. This is Jesus here.

And then some folks want Jesus to bless some children, and the disciples aren't having it

Mostly because children were seen as social nothings—

Dependent nuisances that consumed resources, invisible at best,

Until they were old enough to contribute to a household's wellbeing

But Jesus says: no—those people you think are nothing? To me, they're extraordinary.

And you could learn a thing or two about how much God loves people

If you were willing to nothing yourself in the eyes of the world, become like one of them,

And joyously depend completely on the good will of your Father in heaven.

Finally, a wealthy young man who's attached to his possessions is told that

If he is to be perfect, which is to say, whole,

In right relationship with himself, his neighbor, and his God:
He's to give up all he has for the poor
And follow Jesus.
And this is very disconcerting to him, and he leaves Jesus, which leads our Lord to wonder:
How difficult it will be for those attached to, weighed down by their wealth
To enter the Kingdom.
The disciples wonder at this, too, but eventually, they think they've gotten the math right.
(They don't realize yet: it's not a math problem)
They say: Oh but we've given up everything for you. What will we be getting then?
And while Jesus assures them that they'll receive so much more
Than they could have ever dreamed of giving up
In and through a new community, together (and that's the key):
He ends chapter 19 saying, the first will be last, and the last first.
The last in this world, the nothings: those treated as human garbage, those considered invisible
Those who are poor and have no power
They are considered first in the Kingdom of God.

Everything's upside down! Chapter 19 is one example after another
Of the ways in which the socio-cultural political and economic order of the world as it is
Marriage, Family, Money, Power, Prestige
Is *contrary* to the way the Kingdom of God goes.
And the Kingdom does not, will not, reproduce this world's order or values.
And here, at the beginning of Chapter 20, with this parable of the Kingdom,
Jesus tries to show us what it is that sets it apart—not over against, but apart—
From the kingdoms, the deathly status quos, of this world.

Now, if you recall the parable, the overall gist of things is that the householder is generous,
Particularly to those who come to work in his vineyard last: they receive the same wage
As those who'd been at work longest. In fact, everyone receives the same good wage.
But the generosity of the householder isn't principally shown by the amount of wages given
It's shown in that the wages are given at all.
Consider this: the householder goes out in the morning and calls workers to the vineyard.
Chances are, he knows what work needs doing, and he hires enough laborers to do it.
But the he goes out three hours later, and then three hours after that, and again and again
And he sees that there are others looking for work.
Now, the background here is that, in Jesus' day,
The Roman occupiers and some very wealthy landowners
(Who probably had a friend in Roman military power),
Had been disenfranchising small local farmsteads
In order to enlarge and conglomerate their own holdings.
This meant that many former farmers or small landowners were now forced off their lands
Into being day laborers,
Dependent on the generosity of others
(Likely the very others who had taken their lands in the first place)
For their new livelihood.
The householder in our story goes back time after time to the marketplace
Not because he *needs* laborers, but because he wants to make sure that
Any who answer his call, regardless of the hour in which they answer it,
Can provide for their own households.
He's not paying them what he pays them because they earned it,
He's paying them what he pays them because they need it
And he wants to give them what they need.

And to the folks who answered the call to work first
The householder is unjust precisely because he's generous.
Not principally because they figure they deserve more,
But because they figure those who came later
Deserve less.
The early workers, their expectations shaped by scarcity, by the status quo
Enter into rivalry with the householder and with the other workers.

But consider those other workers for a moment.
Granted, some of them might think to themselves:
The householder doesn't know what he's doing, squandering his money like this,
Still, good for me, but he might want to hire a better manager.
But how many of them might've thought to themselves: this is a mistake.
And: I don't deserve this.
And how many of *them*, knowing the distance between what little they deserve
And how much they've received,
How many of them slowly begin to realize: the rules have changed, the order of things shifted...
That they're caught up in something new and wondrous strange:
A generosity that invites them into solidarity and not rivalry
A new vision of community in which *everyone* is equally regarded as *someone*
A new way of beginning to imagine how the things entrusted to us
Might be intended not for our good only, but for the good of a larger whole;
A new way of being in relationship that looks like a radically generous mutuality
In which we discover, in our mutual self-giving,
In our concern for each other's dignity and wellbeing
In our rejoicing, together, at the goodness and mercy our neighbors receive,
That what we deserve is less and less a concern
And what we can give is more and more our delight.

Now, you might be thinking to yourself: this is a little parable about generosity
God's generosity, not ours.
But the presence of envy in the story, of rivalry
Shows that it's not just about the divine generosity, but about our response to it.
It isn't simply that God is merciful (although he is)
And it isn't simply that his mercy is mind-bogglingly, gratuitously, abundantly generous
(Although it is)
It's that that generosity calls us out of ourselves, not only to gratitude
But into a community in which we find ourselves
Shaped by the loving regard of the gratuitously generous one
Who gives to each equally the one and only thing he has to give:
Himself. And that fully, without reservation, without fear.
And that. Makes. All. The difference:
To be shaped not by the envy, violence, and death-centeredness of the world
That forms us into a people who dehumanize each other, treat each other like refuse,
Render each other powerless and invisible, enviously competing with one other
To ensure that someone somewhere knows they're worth less than us;
But shaped by the gift of regard of one who really loves us, forming us into a people of love.
Together.

The glory of God's mercy is that we do not, in fact, deserve it.
But in Jesus Christ, we have it.
By our envy, our rivalry, our sinfulness, our habitual violence, backbiting, greed,

The ways in which we fail to honor the image of God in each other,
What we deserve in our death-centeredness, Paul affirms in Romans, is death.
But the sovereign God sovereignly desires God's life of love for us, and in Christ
Our death, the death we deserve, the death we inflicted on him
Is ended in his endless life,
And our humanity clothed with his divinity.
We cannot earn this, we certainly don't deserve it, but it's ours,
If we answer God's call to live in it, by it, through it, with it,
If we allow the grace of God to open hearts to receive it in faith.

The Greek word for church, ekklesia, means: to be called out.
Called to give up on everything we think we're owed,
In order to receive freely and thankfully what God desires to give:
A new way of being, a new world of belonging, God's own life of love.
Over and over and over and over and over again: God enters into the places of our failure
Our shame, our darkness, our disenfranchisement, our inhumanity,
And invites us out into something new, something shaped by the loving regard that calls us,
To an adventure of love.
Being part of the adventure of the life of the topsy-turvy upside-down Kingdom of Love
Is not about attaining it as a reward, but receiving it as a gift that transforms us as we receive,
By virtue of answering the call
To come out of sin and death
To be citizens of a new world
Shaped by the loving regard
Of the Infinitely Generous God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.