

Matthew 20:1-16      September 24, 2017

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It was my 45<sup>th</sup> birthday. When I got home I knew that Jim would not be there; he was playing a Christmas gig, but he had left my present on the buffet. I unwrapped it as our sons looked on – it was a dustbuster! You know one of those little hand-held vacuum cleaners? It was accompanied by a card that said “Don’t say this present sucks!” My boys were looking at me with great pity. Neither of them were dating yet, but still they knew that this was a pretty lame present to give the love of your life; though to be fair I had said that I wanted one. Very handy for cleaning up cat hair tumble weeds “Don’t worry, Mom, we got you a present too.” They said and they went upstairs to get it but they were back down in seconds. “Mom, Mom, you have to go upstairs.” “What? Where’s your present?” “Go upstairs, Mom! In your room.” They were really excited, and I thought Oh he probably got me flowers, he knows how much I love flowers...” But when I walked into our bedroom, my mouth fell open because standing there was a beautiful celtic harp. I had been pining for a harp for years without ever imagining that I would get one. They were expensive and what had I done to be worthy of such a wonderful gift? I just stared until one of the boys said, “Go on, Mom, play it!” I walked over and touched the strings – it was magic.

I wonder if that is how the workers who were hired in the eleventh hour felt when they received a whole day’s pay for an hour of work. Did they stand there with their mouths open, just staring at the coins pressed into their hands, overwhelmed and full of wonder at what they had received? I must admit that I never thought much about how before wrestling with this story that Jesus tells us is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It was the workers who had worked all day who got my attention and my emotional response was generally that of an indignant kid. NOT FAIR! Yes, they got what they agreed to but.... This is what the kingdom of heaven is like? What kind of heaven is that where the undeserving get the same as ....the undeserving?

Just prior to telling this story about the laborers in the Vineyard, Jesus welcomes the little children that the disciples try to shoo away. Children then as now in most places in the world had no status and few rights. Yet Jesus says “It is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.

Then from the other end of the spectrum comes a wealthy young man who wants to know what “good deed must I do to earn eternal life?”. Jesus says keep the commandments and references all the ones that are about how we treat one another: Don’t murder or steal or commit adultery, lie about people, honor your parents ; in short love your neighbor as yourself. The wealthy young man says I have kept all these all these since my youth.

In Mark’s Gospel it says that Jesus looking at him loved him. Jesus sees what he doesn’t -- Jesus sees that his stuff and his position keep him from fully entering life. The young man thinks that life is a meritocracy, and that he can be in control by what he does. All he has to do is find out what good deed is required and he can check the eternal life box off his list or maybe he thinks Jesus will simply affirm the common belief that since he is rich that he is already good enough, already blessed by God. Jesus says, “If you want to be perfect sell everything and give to the poor. And then follow me.”

Become like me, Jesus says -- poor and totally dependent on God for everything everyday. Trusting like a child that God will give you enough for this day, like manna from heaven, rely on God not your stuff or your family position.

....And the young man goes away grieving because he just can't do it.

The disciples are shocked when Jesus says that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. "Then who can be saved?" they wonder. But then Peter says, "Hey wait a minute, Jesus, we have left everything to follow you." Jesus says and you will inherit eternal life, but lest they get too smug, he adds a warning "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

And then Jesus tells this story "This is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like"

When those who are hired first are paid last and see that they get the same thing as all the other workers, they begin to grumble. "You've made those who worked only one hour equal to us who have worked all day in the hot sun. In response the landowner in parable poses a question to the grumbling first hired: "Are you envious because I am generous?" In Greek it is actually "Is your eye evil because I am generous?"

The eye is the lamp of the body, Jesus has said earlier. The state of your eye, the way you see things makes all the difference.

When we see with the eyes of the world, we compare, compete, envy and fear. We believe in scarcity -- that the only way we will ever have enough is by having more and more and more and more...Our economy runs on this. Political movements are fueled by this fear, by this resentment that I deserve more because of the color of my skin or my zip code or how long my family has been here. This is the way the world sees it, but it is not Kingdom of Heaven vision.

Kingdom of Heaven vision sees instead that it is all grace, all gift. Not something we earn, something we are given. Having been brought into the vineyard of the Beloved, our hearts are filled to overflowing. And we see others with love and thankfulness, no matter when they came into the vineyard or even if they haven't come or never will.

Thomas Merton wrote:

*To be grateful is to recognize the Love of God in everything He has given us--and He has given us everything.*

What a gift!

When my boys were little we listened to Raffi. And there was one lovely little song came to me -- a prayer really. (Don't worry I am not going to launch into "the wheels on the bus")

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for Sun in the sky.

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for clouds so high.

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for whispering wind.

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for the birds in the spring.

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for the moonlit night

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for the stars so bright.

Thanks for the animals,

Thanks for the land,

Thanks for the people everywhere.

Thanks a lot,

Thanks for all I've got.

Thanks for all I've got.