

Episcopal Church of the Resurrection
Centerville, Utah

September 18, 2011
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YEAR A, Proper 20, Pentecost +14 (RCL)
Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6,37-45, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

WHAT'S MISSING

So today we have the parable of the landowner, and the workers in the vineyard. And it concludes that the last will be the first, and the first will be last. Really? Is that right? What in the world does that even mean? It sounds like so much psycho-babble. It makes no sense whatsoever.

You see, in our daily life, the world in which we spend most of our time, the first are always first. And the last are always the last. That's the way the world works, and it makes sense. The go-getters, those with the best talent, of course end up in the winner's circle. And the less skilled, the slow starters, those who stumble, those who encounter misfortune, and those less motivated, will follow behind. Somebody has to be last. It really can't be any other way. This race is handicapped from the beginning. We are not identical. We are all different, and once we enter the game of life, we inevitably end up in different places, following different paths.

Today's gospel reminds me a little of the beatitudes. Blessed are those who are hungry, for they will be filled. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. It is more of the same kind of upside down thing that makes no sense. And just like the obvious unfairness that is the center of today's gospel, it is hard to deal with it.

At the end of the day, I want to know what it is that Jesus is trying to tell me. I want to find out what the lesson really is, and how to put it to work, so that I can draw closer to God. And that is far from obvious in today's gospel.

One possibility for today's gospel, is the same way that I often come to terms with the confusing promises of the beatitudes. And that is, that in the end, God will make everything right. Because frankly, the meek will always be the meek. There will always be mourning. And there will surely always be the hungry. We know from centuries of experience, that that will always be the case. The only relief, the only way that these things will change, much less get turned upside down, will be in the next life. Now I believe that. I believe that there is a heaven, a place and a time for God and his people to live very close, where pain and suffering are no more. I have just one problem with that. If the righting of all the wrongs, the healing of all suffering, and the repair of all brokenness, awaits in heaven, what are we supposed to do here and now? God must surely expect us to do something more than just wait.

As I looked for answers to this question, I looked, as I always do, at my previous sermons. And I found something missing there, that I hadn't noticed before. My sermons dealing with this gospel, end up where a lot of my sermons go. I find the generosity and loving fullness of God, to be overwhelming. I am reminded how wonderful life with God is and can be. More is better, and less is, well less. And I think when I preach, I want to share that. To help others, who like me, may have forgotten that we have an advocate, to be close at hand when

we struggle. And, if we so choose, to let God lead us in lives of light, joy and profound fulfillment. But that is where I usually finish up. And as far as that goes, it is okay. For all sorts of reasons, I need to be reminded to stay close to God. And it is certainly fine that there may others who can use this same shot of encouragement in their lives.

But I see now where that comes up short. We are only taking care of our own needs and best interests. And when it comes to God, that is a good thing. We need to constantly seek God, and benefit from being as close to God as we can get. But we are really called to do two further things. The first is to live out the gospel teachings of Jesus in our lives. We can be like the owner of the vineyard. We hire the people we need. We are nothing less than fair, and in many cases we are generous. Sometimes crazy generous. We spread the work as broadly as we can. Perhaps the beatitudes are not about reversing the fortunes of the whole planet. Maybe it is a disciple at a time, acting as Christ, one person at a time. One of us, feeds one person who is hungry. One of us comforts one who mourns. When we have the opportunity, we show mercy to one who has known no mercy. And deserves no mercy. One who is like we are before Almighty God. When our eyes have been opened, when our hearts have been opened, there is one thing left. We open our hands, and we go to work in the world. This isn't just a Sunday morning kind of thing. May God help us, and may God correct us if we fail to connect the learning with the doing.

The second piece that I often miss is this. The stunning, life transforming power of God is not a secret, and this is not a private club. How is it possible that we so rarely, and so meekly tell others how great God is? If we believe even a fraction of what we talk about on Sundays, why are we so afraid to tell others? If it matters to us, why would it not matter to others? There is plenty of God to go around. How many gospel lessons are there, that demonstrate the abundance of God? Like today's gospel. Even those coming at the last hour, will get a full share of what God has to offer. May God forgive us, and may God provoke us, if we simply receive the generosity of God, and are not moved to share this greatest of gifts with others.

There is a method of Bible study known as *lectio divina*. It is simple process of taking a small bit of scripture, meditating on it, and reflecting on it's implications. Once you've come to some insight about how the scripture speaks to you, the final step is this. How will you apply this insight in your daily life in the coming week? I would like to extend that invitation to you today. What will you do this week, to live out the good news?