

Worship for September 17, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

\*Call to Worship

To your name, O Lord,

**help us to bow the knee and all its worshiping,**

bow the head in all its thinking,

**bow the will and all its choosing,**

**bow the heart and all its loving. Amen.**

\*Hymn 619 Praise My Soul the King of Heaven, verses 1 and 2

Prayer

**God of love,**

**you have willed that the last be first and you have made a little child the measure of your kingdom.**

**We may be reluctant to embrace humility and service, for to do so may imply work and will require a spirit of cooperation and compromise.**

**Forgive us for our complacency, hesitation, or indifference and give us the wisdom which is from above,**

**so we may understand, that, in your sight, the one who serves is the greatest of all.**

**We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, whose service gives us life and hope. Amen.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God's Word is truth: That Jesus Christ came into the world to redeem and re-form our lives.

The old life is gone and a new life has begun.

Your sins are forgiven.

Be at peace with God, one another, and yourselves. Amen.

First Reading Exodus 16:2-15

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Matthew 20:1-16

Morning Message

According to the source of all wisdom, Google, we find these statistics:

The median salary for garbage collectors in 2021, according to US News and World Reports, is around \$38, 000.

According to Ziprecruiter, the average salary for a cardiologist in West Virginia in 2023 is \$272, 468.

The average pay for a child care worker varies greatly between \$5.00 per hour to \$13,000 per hour.

The median salary for an NFL player is around \$860,000 per year.

These figures probably don't surprise any of us. So, to bring things a little closer to home, chew on this one:

The average pay for a teacher in New York is \$86, 000 a year. The average salary for a teacher in West Virginia is \$45, 000 a year, but varies by county.

What constitutes fair and unfair when it comes to setting a salary? Pay discrepancy is a hot topic in many corners. Does a teacher in West Virginia work any less, prepare any less, face fewer challenges than a teacher in New York? I know we have to allow for cost of living, but, at first glance, this doesn't seem right or maybe we could say it's not "fair."

What constitutes fair and unfair in our text today?

Anyone who has worked an hourly wage at some time in their life can appreciate the inequity in this story. Should someone who has only worked one hour receive the same compensation as the one who has put in a full day's work? I don't even have to think about this. The answer is no. It's just not right.

Rev. Dr. Greg De Loach says that just a block away from where he once served as pastor, was a meeting place for day laborers to gather. Mostly men, young and old, who would do nearly any kind of work- yard work, painting, carpentry, hauling away trash- in order to earn enough to put food on their table that day.

They were not lazy or loitering, they were willing to stand in a place of humility, and present themselves for work. They only wanted what all of us want- a way to provide for themselves and their loved ones. The circumstances we can debate, but the need and the desire are universal.

I've mentioned before what my friend, Joan, calls "Jesus math." Joan was the Executive Director of West Virginia Advocacy and Workcamps. The main mission of WVMAW is to improve housing conditions for the most needy residents of West Virginia. When I say "most needy," I mean those people who live without electricity or adequate water and sewer service, those who live in trailers with rotting floors. They address needs with help from many sources.

Building costs increase every year and weather-related disasters come way too often. This creates a strain on the organization's resources, but, somehow, they manage to reach their goals and sometimes exceed all expectations. Somehow, the funds and volunteers appear. Jesus math.

Well, here's another example of it. Jesus math and our math are calculated differently.

Many biblical scholars believe this parable describes justice in God's economy. What was the concern? There was considerable controversy between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Jewish Christians, like Saul, who became Paul at his conversion, wrote about this in his letters to the early churches. He tried to settle the debate when he said "there is no longer Jew or Gentile," and so forth. Gentile Christians were often considered "Johnny-come-lately" believers. They were considered "lesser thans," with little agency in the emerging church. Paul believed this was wrong-headed.

In the parable, when the workers begin to grumble, the owner asks, "Are you envious because I'm generous?" In Greek, this is translated as "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

Many of us have an eye for evil. That is, we see evil where God sees good. Jesus said so. But, in our defense, is it evil to believe that someone working one hour should be paid less than one who worked all day long?

Jesus calls us out on this. The landowner in the story says, "Oh, but it's my vineyard, my money. We agreed to a wage and I'm not paying you one cent less. I keep my word. Your beef is that I see a way to do good here. I am seeing good."

How can we see good when there is so much evil in the world? You name it: there are so many cruel injustices in life: racism and sexism, crime, religious persecution, ethnic cleansing. There are disasters that bring destruction and death. We can be reminded of evil 24 hours a day.

And we care deeply about overcoming injustice. The General Assembly designates one Sunday in September as Christian and Citizen Sunday, which is why I'm focused in that direction today. We are called on to take our citizenship seriously. The Church calls on all people of faith to work toward a world of peace and equality.

We haven't lost all, but we did lose a champion in that mission with the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg a few years ago. She understood fully the obstacles of injustice: she was a woman, a Jew, and a working mother. And my heroine. Ruth believed in the goodness of God and the potential for doing good and creating a more just nation.

When we say God is good, we have to be willing to admit that God's goodness, God's presence and power, is always held in tension with the cold hard facts: evil exists. Ruth encountered more than her share of that reality.

But, let's return to an application of Jesus math. What good is God pointing us toward in this story?

The faithful, hard-working laborers believe they are more valuable than the late-coming workers. They deserve a larger expression of the landowner's favor. In spiritual terms, Jesus says: the newest convert has as much voice as the one who has been in the church since they were on the Cradle Roll. The newest members have agency same as the old-timers.

One of the things I've learned and love about Kuhn is that several people came to Kuhn when St. Andrews closed. And, you have embraced one another, included one another, value one another. The faith and lives of the full congregation are richer because we are together. I might even go so far as to say that what was a painful, traumatic event, the closing of a church, turned out to be a blessing. God used it for good.

Rev. Suzanne Guthrie offers these remarks related to this passage:

A man named Peter died and his wife asked Suzanne to officiate his funeral service. The only problem was that Peter had no use for religion. He was vocal and profane about his lack of need for God or any of God's associates.

Well, Peter became very sick. He was a drug addict, skilled at manipulation, mad at the world, and terminally ill with AIDS.

But, Suzanne says, Peter got to see heaven. One day, in Peter's sight, the space above the television, beyond the wall and the ceiling, opened into a billowing heaven. He saw dead relatives. He saw angels. Peter described in detail to his family what he was seeing. In the next death crisis, Peter allowed the priest he'd previously thrown out of his room, to hear his confession. And Peter died in peace, having seen heaven in the eleventh hour.

Some of us, who have worked in the vineyard of God all our lives, have never seen heaven. Not once. Mother Teresa is remembered as saying she never had a personal theophany-a vision-of God. But, what wonders God did through her. Others have seen God through her ministry.

Who did God love more? Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or Peter, the addict?

God loved them both more than we can even imagine. Because in Jesus math, you just can't put a price on grace.

\*Hymn 619 Praise My Soul the King of Heaven, verses 3 and 4

\*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

\*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

\*Hymn 607 Doxology

\*Prayer of Dedication

**We give with gratitude for all our God has given us. In the upside down world of the Gospel, we measure our wealth not by what we have but by what we can give away. Lord, God, receive our offerings today to bless your church, your creation, and your children, wherever there is need. Amen.**

\*Hymn 443 There Is a Redeemer

\*Blessing

And now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be upon you today and always. Amen.

\*Postlude