

## Homily 24Sept2017 (Ron Flaming)

Ex 16:2-15 Ps 105:1-6,37-45 Phil 1:21-30 Mt 20:1-16

*May the mumbling of my mouth and the groping of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God. Amen.*

### **Opening**

Jimmy Carter, President of the United States and Habitat for Humanity volunteer is a public embodiment of the interpretative statement at the end of today's parable: namely the last shall be first, and the first shall be last.

### **Introduction**

To understand today's parable of the Workers in the Vineyard as recorded in our gospel reading it helps to look at the narrative context in the Gospel of Matthew.

### **Context in Matthew**

This parable at the beginning of chapter 20 is set in the middle of two scenes that lead up to the story of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Jesus' last week before his crucifixion.

19:1 Jesus leaves Galilee to cross the Jordan where he is followed by crowds. Pharisees dispute with Jesus about divorce which leads to a private discussion with his disciples about celibacy.

19:13 little children are brought to Jesus and he says "The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these".

19:16 immediately after the comment about little children and the Kingdom, a rich young man asks what he has to do get eternal life. After a short exchange Jesus tells him what he has to do is sell all his possessions. This leads to a private discussion with the disciples about what they will receive since they had in fact already left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus says they will receive a 100 fold, *but* ... many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first.

20:1 Immediately after that statement Matthew has Jesus launching into our parable of the Workers in the Vineyard which appears to be an object lesson on the statement that many who are first will be last. The parable concludes with a slight variation on the statement that many who are first will be last by saying, "the last will be first and the first will be last".

20:17 From there Matthew goes on to the next scene which has Jesus walking with his disciples to Jerusalem when he tells them that he will be tortured, crucified and rise on the third day.

20:20 Before the disciples can respond, the mother of two of the disciples lobbies with Jesus that her sons be given seats at his right and left side in his Kingdom. When the other disciples are indignant Jesus calls the group together for a chat. Listen, among other people in the world

their rulers lord it over them. But that is not how it is to be among you. Whoever wants to be great must be a slave for others. Just like I came not to be served but to serve.

Pay attention, the next incident in Matthew's narrative is cleverly placed! ... 20:29 Matthew knows that he is reporting a baffling teaching by Jesus: "to be great you need to be a slave". So the very next thing that happens in Matthew's story is that Jesus heals two blind men, giving them sight to see what they couldn't see before. Poking at the gospel audience to "open their eyes" and really see what Jesus has said.

### **Understanding The Parable**

So what is the meaning of Jesus' parable, what he is saying? What do we see today?

One interpretive approach would recognize that this narrative sequence in Matthew is likely not what a "camera of history" would have recorded. And would then try to dig through the gospel composition to what the historical Jesus would have said and meant with the parable in a likely historical context.

Another approach would be allegorize the parable ... those first workers in the vineyards are the Jews, and the last to come are the gentiles. And God treats all equally.

Another approach is to take Matthew's story at face value to see what early church through Matthew is remembering from Jesus. By looking at the sweep of Matthew's gospel this is what I am doing today.

This entire narrative culminates at 20:26 (whoever wishes to be great must be your servant) & verse 27 (whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave). Jesus tells the disciples, Matthew tells the readers and hearers of the gospel, that in the Kingdom of Heaven the great ones are those who are servants of all, in concrete metaphor "the last shall be first and the first shall be last". If we look to the coming crucifixion we can see that this teaching is a preparation to understanding how the Lord could be crucified as a criminal, the most rejected in society.

This illustration of this parable that the last shall be first and the first shall be last is meant to help the disciples (and gospel readers) to grasp the statement that in the Kingdom of Heaven that great ones are those who are servants of all, those who are first in the Kingdom are slaves of all.

This is in contrast, a reversal, to how power is exercised in the rest of the world were the great ones, the first ones, demand service *by* others. Empires have conquered and exploited people since ancient times. Babylon kidnapped Jewish leaders into exile. Rome extracted wealth through taxation of subjugated nations. The British Empire and its successors in North America extracted the portable wealth of furs and timber, and then the land itself from inhabiting peoples.

Christians, especially Mennonites have often understood Jesus to be talking about personal

humility. As if we are called to treat ourselves as least and last. If we're last now, if we're humble and only serve others without demanding any service in return, then we'll be first in the final Kingdom and those who thought they had power will be the slaves. As if Jesus were saying that in the Kingdom social stratification will simply be reversed in a system of justifiable retribution.

But such an interpretation sidesteps the revolutionary nature of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is saying that in the Kingdom, things are completely different. Greatness in God's eyes is not built on our framework social status and power. As we read in Ps 62 last week "Surely the lowborn are but a breath, the highborn are but a lie." Greatness in God's eyes is built on faithful acts of love and service.

Jesus is not talking simply about individual piety as humility in deference to others. When he says the "first shall be last", he is saying that our concept of greatness will be replaced, converted, in The Kingdom. When he says "whoever wishes to be great must be your servant, he means that "service" is the kind of community life and social structure that follows in the Way of the Kingdom of God.

### **So What**

What do relationships structured on love and service instead of power and greed look like?

Well ... maybe ...

A business motivated to serve will look very different than a business motivated solely to maximize profit. Which of those two types of businesses is more likely to pay a just and living wage to its workers?

A teacher whose first goal is to serve will be a different teacher in the long run than one whose first goal is to climb the pay ladder to a final pension.

A supervisor whose goal is to support her staff to work to their full potential is a very different supervisor than one whose assumption is that staff must serve her. Which one would motivate you to perform your best?

An economic system structured to rationalize the distribution of the benefits of Creation to all people would look different than an economic system structured to rationalize the concentration and hoarding of resources by a few.

### **Conclusion**

Open your eyes! Jesus wants to heal our spiritual blindness. Open your eyes and see that only when the first are last, only then are we *beginning* to fulfill Jesus' and our weekly prayer that the will of God be done on earth as it is in the heaven.

**Amen. May it be so.**