

The Rev. Erin Hensley  
September 18, 2011  
Pentecost 14A  
Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

### The Wilderness Within

By this point in the Gospel according to the Matthew, Jesus has preached his Sermon on the Mount. He has instructed the disciples on divorce, remarriage, and the place of children. A sincere, financially successful, young scholar of Jewish law just asked what he must do to inherit eternal life and Jesus says, “Go and sell what you have and give your money to the poor, then you will have the heavenly treasure.” The young man with many possessions turns from Jesus and grieves. Quick on the draw Peter then turns to Jesus and asks, “what about us, Lord? We left our families for you. What do we have?” Jesus calms their nerves, says yes, you’ll receive a hundredfold, but remember, “many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” But Jesus does not stop there; he tells his disciples the “parable of the generous landowner.”<sup>1</sup> He tries to get them to see that in Christ there is a new kind of family.

A landowner went out early in the morning to hire workers for his business. He agreed with the workers for the usually daily wage and they went to work. This landowner went to the marketplace again at 9:00a.m. and told others to work in the vineyard to and that he would pay them “whatever is right” (Matthew 20:4). So they went. The landowner returned to the marketplace again at noon, three, and five in the afternoon. He asked why the workers were still standing there and they replied, “Because no one has hired us.” And he sent them to work anyway. When evening came the owner said to his manager give them their pay from the most recently hired worker to the one I first hired this morning. By the time the folks first hired came in line, they thought they would receive more money, but they received a daily wage just like everybody else. And they grumbled, “Look, sir, these other guys only worked an hour and we worked the long hours under the scorching sun.” And the manager replied, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go. Can you not handle my generosity for your brother?”

When we take this parable seriously, Jesus’ disciples then and now run smack dab into a problem-ourselves. We second-guess those laborers who the landowner hired later in the day; we wonder if they had really done all they could to have found work. We usually see ourselves in the characters of those first hired; we claim ourselves as the ones who have borne the heat of the day. And last but certainly not least, we can easily identify with the resentment of those first hired. We like the sound of grace, but when we’ve been working hard and something seemingly unmerited comes someone else’s way, we resent such generosity.

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<sup>1</sup> Perper, Emily. “Levine: Parable of landowner and laborers teaches importance of generosity.” *The Chautauquan Daily* 21 August 2011: Interfaith Lecture Recaps. Web. <http://chqdaily.com/2011/08/21/levine-parable-of-landowner-and-laborers-teaches-importance-of-generosity/> 17 Sept. 2011.

But the truth of the matter is that all is gift. The truth of the matter is that we do not know the reality of other people's lives; we know not the pain or tribulation of another. The truth of the matter is that we barely know the reality of our lives, the rough places in our own inner landscapes. We work and make lists and work some more. We say we believe God loves us, that there is nothing we can do any better that will make God love us any more. We say we believe God loves us, that there is nothing we can do any worse that will make God love us any less. But we keep bearing the brunt of the day as if doing so will get us more in life or from God. Subconsciously we feel entitled. The ability to be "self-made" men and women drives us just as hard as Pharaoh drove the Israelites before they crossed that Red Sea. And like our spiritual ancestors in the wilderness we grumble when things don't seem fair according to human standards.

The Israelites who God led out of Egypt thought that the move from bondage to freedom shouldn't be so hard. The hunger and the fear they were experiencing in the wilderness just didn't seem right compared to what they just left. The laborers who were hired first in the story thought they should have received more; the money they received wasn't fair compared to those who worked fewer hours. But who could blame those first workers? They were so incredibly tired from the long days and the scorching heat. Who could blame those Israelites? They were incredibly anxious about their own survival. And who can blame us some days? As one of your clergy, I only know a glimmer of what you are going through at this time in your life. But from that glimmer, you all bear so much.

The comfort for me and I hope the comfort for you is that complaint is an acceptable part of our life with God. One can be faithful and murmur every now and then. We are allowed to say, "God, I don't know if I have what I need to live in this barren place." We are allowed to name that "Life is so hard without this friend that I love but see no longer; why is this happening to me?" We are allowed to ask the question of Peter, "What about me, Lord?" Yes, if all we do is air our grievances, there will be little room for the grace of God to be heard.

However, the cries of the Israelites in the wilderness, Peter's question "What about us, Lord?" the resentment of those first hired, the complaints of your heart-all of these things- can remind us of our dependence on God alone.<sup>2</sup> They keep us in conversation with God, our maker and redeemer and sustainer. They remind us that we are not and were never made to be self-made men and women. We need God and we need one another. And when we name hunger or fear or resentment aloud to the Lord, there's more room for God to rain down manna. There's more room for God to soften our hearts to be as generous as the landowner in the parable. There is more room for us to learn how to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is enough love for all of God's people and all of God's creation. There is enough love for you, me, and every other living thing. There is no reason to hide anything from the living God. God's heart is large enough for all kinds and conditions of men and women, so cling to His compassion as you turn and face the wilderness within yourself. And when we face such wilderness with God's help, we will be closer to the family Jesus calls us to be. We will even see the glory of the Lord. *Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> "We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us. We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone" from "A General Thanksgiving" in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 836.