

The ever-returning God
Matthew 20:1-16, Pentecost 19, Year A
21 September 2008
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

To this day, I can't take my eyes off that photograph. When I see it, I find myself mesmerized. It shows the limp and lifeless body of a priest being carried over a mound of dust and rubble by four other men: a police officer, two firemen, and an emergency responder. The gritty looks on their faces match the grit that billows all around them.

I can't take my eyes off that photograph. You've likely seen it. It was taken by Reuters News photographer in the mid-morning of September 11, 2001. The cleric is Fr. Mychal Judge, chaplain to the New York City Fire Department. When the planes were flown into the World Trade Center, Fr. Judge rushed to the scene and began offering Last Rites to those he found near death along the sidewalks. As the conflagration blazed above his head, Fr. Judge moved ever closer to the epicenter. He ultimately found himself all the way in the lobby of the North Tower of the Trade Center when the South Tower collapsed. A wave of concrete and steel came crashing from the one building into the other, and as he prayed with victims Fr. Judge became a victim himself.

There were twenty-four minutes between the collapse of the first and second towers. It was in that momentary interlude between hells that the four men retrieved Mychal Judge. They had just witnessed the apocalyptic crumbling of the first tower, and they could look above their heads and see the second tower smoldering. Yet, despite what they'd seen, they returned. I don't know what ultimately happened to those five. I don't know whether they survived the day or survive still. Chances are as good as not that they didn't. What I do know with great surety is that they, like Fr. Judge, *kept going back* into the dust, rubble, and smoke. They knew that the number of those who desperately needed their life-saving assistance was staggering. They knew that unless they returned to that dangerous, confusing, disorienting scene, others would be lost. And they did return, again and again.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is at pains to explain to his followers what his father's kingdom is like. Just before this passage, a rich young man and then the disciples themselves have come to Jesus attempting to justify their place in the kingdom of heaven. Each can recite the hard work he has done or the things he has given up for the sake of God. In response, Jesus tells a parable.

The kingdom of heaven, he says, is like a landowner who goes to the marketplace at daybreak to hire laborers for his vineyard. He promises his workers the wage necessary to sustain them, and then he sends them into the vineyard. But then the landowner returns at 9 a.m.... at noon...at 3 p.m....and again just an hour before dusk. Each time he hires whoever he finds in the marketplace and sends them into the vineyard. At the end of the day, he calls all the workers back to him. To those he'd hired only an hour before, the landowner pays a full day's wage. Those who have worked all day begin to think they will surely receive some greater reward. But when their turn comes, they receive no more than the sustenance that was originally promised them, and they grumble at the landowner's generosity toward the others. Either the latecomers should receive less than a full day's wage, they believe, or else those who worked from dawn 'til dusk should receive a bonus!

The rich young man and the disciples, who have so recently approached Jesus, can certainly sympathize. They're ones who have labored in so many ways, and they want to be rewarded appropriately. We can sympathize, too, I think. We consider ourselves industrious, hard-working people, and we expect to receive our due for our labor. If we're honest we'll admit that those who skirt by—the rule-breakers, the latecomers, the bystanders, and the lazy—irritate us, even if our irritation goes unspoken.

But then *our* focus is the *disciples'* focus, and the entire reason Jesus tells this parable in just this way is to point out that we direct our attention to the *wrong place*. The kingdom of heaven, he says, is *not* one in which reward is doled out according to those who perceive themselves to work the hardest or be the most committed and pure. That's not the storyline at all. The kingdom's story is about a *landowner who keeps returning* to that place where the aimless and the desperate are to be found. In the morning light, in the heat of the day, when time is almost up he keeps returning, offering a place in his vineyard to any who will respond. There is no indication that *he needs* more people. Rather, he returns because there are ever *more people who need* the place and sustenance he has to offer. In other words, the people don't exist for the good of the vineyard. The vineyard exists for the salvation of the people.

And so, as Craig Kocher says, “the story is about a God who wants everyone inside the vineyard, who will not stop rushing out into the marketplace until all have been rounded up, who will not rest until the outsiders, the forgotten, and the lonely have been included alongside the skilled, the timely, and the hardworking, even if it costs God everything.”¹

¹ Kocher, Craig. “Living by the Word,” in *The Christian Century*, September 9, 2008, page 23.

Thank God the kingdom of heaven *isn't* one in which the reward we receive is contingent upon our commitment and labor! Because our indignation begins to break down when we realize what *real* commitment to the kingdom looks like. It is defined by the God who will return again and again, come what may, to rescue and restore the forgotten and the hurting. It is by *that* model that our Christian lives and labor are judged, and by that model, how do we fare? What does our work for the kingdom look like? In the world—and in the church—about what do we worry and fret? How proper we are? Theology? Politics? Who's right and who's wrong? Compared to these things, how much of our love, energy, and resources do we expend for those who are lonely and lost, without thought of payback in any way?

It turns out we aren't those who have labored to spread God's grace since daybreak. We're more like those who barely show up at quitting time, and oftentimes not at all. And yet, to us God-in-Christ returns again and again. To us he offers a hand and an invitation, to live in and for him in the vineyard of his love and grace. No matter how late in the day we respond, God returns *for us*.

One of my closest friends in ministry serves a parish in Lafayette, Louisiana. In the week after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, a group of local Lafayette clergy of which my friend was part gathered to discuss the tragedy that had befallen New Orleans scarcely two hours away. Various priests and pastors spoke up. Most talked of raising money. Many wrung their hands at the hopelessness of the situation. A few spoke the likely sentiments of a few others and argued that those who were stranded in the city should have evacuated when they had the chance. A deacon walked into the meeting late, his shirt dirty and his face beaded with sweat. He listened to the conversation briefly, and then he got up to leave. "Have you nothing to share, brother?" asked the convener of the meeting.

"I'm sorry, I don't," said the deacon, and he continued to make his exit.

"But what would you suggest we do about New Orleans?" the convener asked again.

The deacon paused for just a moment and said, "Well, you can come with me. I've spent the last two days trolling my boat up and down the streets of New Orleans, ferrying forgotten people out of the city as I've been able. I came to the meeting today to see who else might help, but there isn't time for so much talk. I'm going back to save those I can."

With that, the deacon left the parish hall to return to his boat and those in need.

Two true but extreme stories: the rescuers on 9/11 and a solitary deacon in the aftermath of a hurricane. In the midst of each of these horrific events, we find *kingdom parables* of those who return again and again, offering grace to those in need. No time is spent weighing merit or parceling out different rewards. Instead, what is offered is the same to all and is nothing less than salvation.

What is the kingdom of God like? It is a dusty firefighter or a sweaty deacon, tirelessly returning to a burning building, a flooded street, a marketplace, *the recesses of our hearts*. God pays no attention to the time of day. It does not matter if it is early morning or the moment before nightfall. He cares only that we take his hand and accept his invitation into the vineyard of his grace. And once we do, *we* are called to *become* the firefighter, the deacon, the teacher, the feeder, the disciple—*whoever we need to be for whomever has need of love*.

For most of us, most of the time, the task before us won't be as momentous as 9/11 or Katrina, but it may be no less daunting. We live in a world in which every impulse is to react and respond like the laborers who have put in a day's work, exalting ourselves and judging others by artificial standards that don't matter in a world so full of despondency and pain.. But Jesus the Christ gives us a better storyline by which to live. It is the story of the God who rushes in with arms outstretched in grace, again and again.

This is a new year. God returns to us yet again, offering us a place in the vineyard. Will we accept, and will we then go to work for the kingdom? *Amen*.