

Cornerstone III: Ecclesia

Welcome to third week of our message series called Cornerstone. This series is centered around the bedrocks of our faith and what has brought our parish to the point where we find ourselves today. If you've missed the first two weeks, please go to our messages on our website.

We talked about the most basic principle and practice of all: *love*. The mission of our church is to *Follow Christ, love all, and grow disciples*. Our parish has grown and grown healthy as we have grown in our commitment to this mission. Love precedes growth, significance and success. If an organization is successful, if a group or a company is making an impact, it is because people have loved it to that point. We are where we are because we are a community of people who have committed to love *this* parish.

Seven years ago, when we decided to set out in a deliberately *different* direction, we wanted to build on the strengths that we already had at Holy Eucharist and create a fresh dynamic approach to sharing our faith with our community and those seeking a relationship with Christ. We wanted a church that strives to fulfill the mission of Christ by reaching people where they are. That became our *vision to serve our mission – To Follow Christ, Love All, Grow Disciples*. While the *mission* of the Church never changes, the *methods, the strategies that serve the mission* can, and sometimes should and sometimes must.

We loved our church and the vision God gave us. Despite obstacles we encountered, we remained faithful to that vision, and that *faithfulness* was *fruitful*. We are here today because we have been fruitful. This is fruit of love.

Last week we talked about the importance of *grace*. We all need grace. Grace is a gift. You can't buy it, you can't earn it, you'll never ever work your way to it, you can't pay it *back*. *You can only pay it forward*, and the Church was established to be the primary place where that happens. The Church is God's chosen instrument of grace. Other organizations can build houses, feed the hungry, give shelter to the homeless and heal the sick, and we should certainly do those things as a parish, but *no other organization* has as its only mission the paying forward of God's grace we have received from God. When we perform acts of charity as a church, we do it because we have received grace from God and are compelled to love others as a result.

Today we are looking at something you've probably never heard of before, but something foundational and fundamental to the life of the church. To do it, as we did last week, we're looking at a parable of Jesus. These were stories he told with lessons to instruct his followers.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them out into his vineyard. Matthew 20:1-2.

An owner of a vineyard has work that needs to be done, and so he goes to the marketplace where day laborers would congregate at the beginning of the day.

The story continues:

Going out about nine o'clock, the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, "You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just." So they went off. Matthew 20:3.

A few hours later the owner goes out again and finds idle people, and again at noon and three and does likewise. And then he goes out again at the five o'clock hour, when there is only about an hour left before quitting time, and discovers still more idle people whom he invites to labor in his vineyard. Which doesn't seem to make much sense at face value.

Anyway,

When it was evening the owner said to the foreman, "Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first." When those who had started about five o'clock came each received the usual daily wage. So, when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. Matthew 20:8-10.

So, the people who came at the end of the day received the same compensation as those who worked the whole of the day. Those later thought, because they worked all day, they would get *more*, but instead they get paid *the same* as everyone else.

And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last ones worked only an hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat." Matthew 20:11-12.

This seems like a very valid point. You would think they would get more since they labored longer and accomplished more for the vineyard owner. We would never do this in our own businesses and organizations. If we paid those who worked longer the same as those who worked less hours, everyone would start working less. But Jesus is talking about the kingdom of heaven. He is talking about God's kingdom and God's economy and not our economy. Apparently, God's economy is different from ours.

The other problem is they are looking at the situation from their perspective and not the owner's. They feel ill-treated because they're looking only at their situation, but they've forgotten one simple fact which the owner is quick to remind them about.

The owner said to them in reply,

My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage. Take what is yours and go. Matthew 20:13-14.

“My friend” is a sort of gentle rebuke. He held up his end of the bargain. He promised to pay them a days’ pay for a days’ work.

He continues,

What if I wish to give the last one the same as you? Or am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous? Matthew 20:15.

They had forgotten one little fact: The money was his. He reframes the real problem. The real problem isn’t *his* generosity; the real problem was *their* perspective. The money was his. Like last week’s parable, this parable is about grace. Grace isn’t fair. And that’s only a problem when we don’t get what we think we deserve or want more than we got. We don’t complain when grace works in our favor. Jesus doesn’t have the five o’clock workers complain that they got paid too much for so little work. Why not? Because it is unrealistic; that would never happen.

The parable teaches us of the *graciousness and generosity* of God, who is represented by the landowner. God is a giver who gives lavishly. He invites all his followers to display the same generosity. The parable also teaches *something else* about God. God is looking for more and more people to get to work in his vineyard to get to work building his kingdom. The owner goes out at dawn, at noon, at 3 pm and even in the last hour looking for people to get on board with his work. God is gathering a *growing movement of people* who are about *doing* something, *building* something, and its never too late to get involved.

Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus discloses this plan to the apostles, “*On this rock I will build my church. and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*” Matthew 16:18. He tells the apostles that he will build his *Church*. We often think of buildings when we hear the word Church, but Jesus never built a building. If that’s what he wanted his followers to be about, he would have said he was going to build Temples or synagogues. But the word in Matthew’s gospel, was a very curious choice: in the original Greek the word “*Ecclesia*.”

Ecclesia is a word that doesn’t even appear in the Bible until Jesus uses it in this Gospel. The apostles would not have even known what he was talking about. That Greek word was not used to describe religious settings or gatherings; it wasn’t a religious word at all. It refers to assemblies or gatherings of people in a given locale, for some specific purpose, usually a civic or community-wide one. Typically it was used in reference to town hall meetings, or the coming together of a city council at the city hall for some deliberate purpose, *and here’s the key...*for some purpose that impacted not just the people gathered in the assembly...for some purpose that impacted not just the congregation...but for some purpose that impacted the larger community. When Jesus launched the Church, he launched a movement. The project we join him in is not simply, initially, necessarily or primarily, the construction of a building. It is not the construction of buildings or the maintenance of a museum; it’s not a monument to be viewed or a destination to be visited; it’s a movement.

It’s a *movement*. So, you know what that means? Its gotta *move*. A *growing* movement, so it’s got to *grow*. A growing movement of growing disciples who are gathering more people,

who are *not* disciples, to become disciples. It is a movement that is building the kingdom of God.

What's that?

The kingdom of God is the place where God rules people's heads and hearts. It is the place where they allow God to have control over the family, their finances, their future, their career, their recreation and, increasingly, over every and all areas of their lives. The movement is to lead people into a growing relationship with Christ. The work of God's kingdom is connecting people to that purpose. To be a part of the movement, means to reorient our life around the person of Jesus Christ. It is a movement to be Jesus' witnesses not only where we live but to the ends of the earth. And a mission that is expansive and has no room for permanent spectators or selfish consumers. It has no room for people sitting idle and not getting to work.

One way to get to work right now is to join a Small Group. Yes, they're back! We believe at Holy Eucharist that Small Groups have an impact on our discipleship journey. It's a setting that helps us to reflect on our faith, encourages us to see where we need to grow, and supports us in that growth through connecting with others on the journey. When we grow as disciples, we are better equipped to grow the church and be a part of her movement.

Our opportunity we have in building the Kingdom of God as disciples is significant. Think about it. The Church is the only organization that gathers together all sectors of society on a regular basis, (a weekly basis) for a meaningful purpose. Previous to the pandemic, you would gather, not me, but you would gather as Eagles fans for the purpose of entertainment, which is fine. But 70,000 people gathering together to watch a game doesn't change the world no matter who wins. But as the church we gather together people from all walks of life to join the movement of the kingdom of heaven in our community.

And its never too late to join.

Movements happen when they are embraced by the hearts of people who follow them. Movements happen when individuals willingly and passionately move in concert with one another. This is why it is vital that we gather each week at Mass. It is also why we gather in small groups. Small Groups are where the big church gets small. We are gathering together so that we can move in-concert with one another to impact our community and our world.

The point of gathering here is not to relieve our guilt, or avoid hell, or enjoy a break from the rest of life, or even for the simple benefit of your family. We gather together to change and transform our lives so that increasingly we can change and transform our community. and our world to reflect the kingdom of God. That is the Ecclesia! Let's be that Church.