

Sermon, Proper 20A, September 20, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:14-16)

Apparently it takes years to grow a good crop of grapes. One has to work with the soil, temperature, and rainfall provided. There are no guarantees; failure is always possible; it’s a lot of hard work. Much rests in God’s hands. Jesus’ audience would have had many who tended small vineyards. They would have understood all that was at stake (so to speak).

If a similar parable were presented to us in western Massachusetts what would the likely crop be? Hadley is sometimes touted as the “Asparagus Capital of the World.” Asparagus takes two years to produce a harvest. It is definitely worth the wait, though! In the spring I always look for the first local asparagus—and fiddlehead ferns. Raspberries are also tricky to establish, requiring patience and care. Sometimes the initial yield is sparse—perhaps making it all the more precious. It seems this is an “enter at your own risk” sort of kingdom. Yet it is one that promises sweetness.

I find it interesting that the landowner makes a slightly different promise to each group of workers. To the first group hired early in the morning he offers the “usual daily wage.” In the Greek text it is specifically a single denarius. It is enough to buy food for one day. Surely there are echoes here of the daily manna

provided the Israelites in their wilderness journey. And Jesus taught us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” This is a fundamental promise from God. It is actual food of course, but also extends to our daily need for spiritual nourishment. Spend all your days and hours in this vineyard, and this is what you will have.

The groups of potential workers the landowner encounters at 9:00 a.m., noon, and 3:00 are offered something less concrete. The landowner tells them, “I will pay you whatever is right.” The Greek is even harder to interpret. It says literally, “Whatever if might be right...” What does the owner of the vineyard have in mind? Surely he plans to prorate their wages based on hours worked? Yet they too receive their “daily bread.” They too know the sweetness of laboring in this vineyard to which they have been invited. It strikes me that these hours that the landowner chooses to seek more laborers correspond to the liturgical hours of prayer. What better times to find ourselves in God’s presence, to make ourselves available to further God’s kingdom?

The workers hired late in the day give a wistful response to the landowner when he asks them, “Why are you standing here idle all day?” They tell him, “No one has hired us.” (Matthew 16:6-7) Even at the eleventh hour, they are called to do what they can. Not only do they receive their daily bread, they are first in line instead of last. Still they try; still they wait.

It is so disorienting to be late for something, especially if it is something long-hoped-for, the answer to prayers. Even thinking about what it is like to be in this state put knots in my stomach. A memory came to me about being late for an appointment. It was because the place of the appointment had changed. It was on the same street but in a different building. It was the stuff of anxiety dreams. I finally found the right entrance and went in. The person I was meeting with was so kind, so welcoming. They understood my confusion. I was breathing hard in my rush to get there. I was invited to take the time to hang up my coat, to sit down, to take a breath. All was well. While the appointment was important at the time, it is the welcome I received that helped most—and what I remember. Does God know this about us, that we are all just trying to do the best we can?

So I understand the combined longing, regret, and anxiety these workers may have felt. Some of the things in my life that have meant most to me have come to me when I thought it was too late. You know me as someone who loves to sing. You may be surprised to know I didn't take it seriously until I was thirty: too late for a "career." On the other hand maybe better to be an amateur, i.e. someone who does it for love. All during seminary I asked God (somewhat ruefully), "Why me? Why now?" Didn't I get to the marketplace too late? This parable isn't about who we are, or what we may deserve, or what is fair. It is about God's generosity.

Perhaps because we have had so many beautiful days recently, the hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” (Hymn 416) has been running through my head. It was written by poet and classics professor Folliott Sandford Pierpont. Inspired by the view of the countryside near Bath, England where he lived, he wrote his reflections on all that God has given us in Creation and in the Church. The text remained in the back of my mind until the second verse emerged more clearly:

“For the wonder of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale and tree and flower,
sun and moon and stars of light.

Christ, our Lord, to thee we raise
this, our hymn of grateful praise.”

If we look, if we are patient, there is something wondrous to find in each hour in God’s presence, in God’s kingdom. Maybe it doesn’t matter so much when we get there. Maybe what matters is our gratitude for what we have received. Apparently Pierpont’s original wording of the refrain was this: “Christ, our God, to thee we raise; This our sacrifice of praise.” Eucharistic Prayer A includes this same phrase: “We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving...” This is a reference to Hebrews 13:15: “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that confess his name.” Having been invited into the vineyard, this is how we can express our own fruitfulness.

This is the “fruitful labor” of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Philippians. Yes, Paul longs to be united with Christ, yet recognizes what he may be called to do in the here and now. He chooses to remain for their sake. Paul is writing to the Philippians from jail. Still he is able to speak of the graciousness of God who grants them—and us—“the privilege of believing in Christ.” (Philippians 1:29) He speaks of “progress and joy in faith”—also gifts from God, while compassionately recognizing their struggles. More than that they are united in their struggles. Whether we arrive early or late, may we find strength in sharing daily bread, “striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.” (Philippians 1:27).

For the beauty of the earth, Hymn 416

1 For the beauty of the earth,
for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies.

[Refrain:]
Christ our God, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.

2 For the beauty of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower,
sun and moon and stars of light, (Refrain)

3 For the joy of ear and eye,
for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony
linking sense to sound and sight, (Refrain)

4 For the joy of human love,
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above,
for all gentle thoughts and mild, (Refrain)

6 For each perfect gift of thine,
to the world so freely given,
faith and hope and love divine,
peace on earth and joy in heaven. (Refrain)

--Folliott Sandford Pierpont

