

September 20, 2020

“Something Worth Not Working For”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Scripture Readings:

Psalm 145:1-8

*I will extol you,
my God and Ruler,
and bless your name
forever and ever.
Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name
forever and ever.
Great is God,
and greatly to be praised;
God's greatness is unsearchable.
One generation shall laud your works
to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.
On the glorious splendor
of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works,
I will meditate.
The might of your awesome deeds
shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.
They shall celebrate the fame
of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud
of your righteousness.
God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger
and abounding
in steadfast love.*

Matthew 20:1-16

[And Jesus said:] " For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him,

'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, '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; 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."

How would you feel? How would you feel if you had sweated all day, were covered in dust and dirt, your back hurt, your hands were blistered, you had been on your feet all day and some Johnnies come lately show up, don't even break into a sweat and get paid the same amount as you? I know I would have something to say about that. It isn't fair is it?

This is one of those over studied stories in the Bible in which the majority of theologians tend to conclude that Jesus is showing us in this parable that the Love of God, cannot be measured, we can't earn it, it just is no matter what. I agree with this, but I think there is more to it. In one of my sermons a while back I talked about Jesus using the parables to make us think, but it isn't just that. He challenges us to think beyond are current abilities.

I don't know about you but I am not that capable of understanding anything that is infinite. I remember as a little nerdy child when I first started thinking about infinity, about God, space and time probably because my parents would let me stay up to watch Star Trek. I would be in bed at night pondering these things and my stomach would start to tie into knots with fear.

I had thought myself into a very anxious place by not being able to understand something. I would think... how can time be infinite? How did the universe begin? And what was before that and who made God ad infinitum?

I would get up in the middle of the night and go in the kitchen and make a lot of noise pretending to get a glass of water just so one of my parents would get up. Somehow just seeing them would make things okay again.

The worst it ever got was when I found out that at some point in time our sun will swell up into a red giant star and possibly explode into a SuperNova and all life on Earth will cease to exist. I told this to my father when he got up to check on all the racket.

He tried not to laugh, and you could tell that he was proud that he was raising such a thinker and then he told me it would be okay because by then we would have spaceships that could go far away where humanity would be safe.

The point is that my child's mind could not comprehend such things and I didn't like it. So how in the world could I comprehend the infinite love of God?

As humans that are products of Western civilization we are brought up in a very dualistic society. We learn right from wrong, we think in terms of Good vs. Evil, we construct gender norms based on Male vs. Female, we think in Black vs. White, Heaven vs Earth, Heart vs Mind. This is actually rooted in Greek philosophy as men tried to figure out the world, how to understand it. They were obsessed with opposites and tried to break down everything that way.

Now don't get me wrong it has been an important part of our evolution to categorize things, to break things down in order to understand their function and much knowledge has come from this. Knowledge we need to function every day. It is estimated that the average human makes over 35,000 unconscious decisions every day. We need our categories to understand and feel secure, yet...

When we don't temper them with understanding that we still have just scratched the surface of comprehending ourselves, the universe, God and each other we end up with a world just like ours. Where everything gets broken down into either or.

Either you are right or wrong, conservative or liberal, either you are male or female, White American or other, support Black Lives Matter or you support police, Red or Blue. This dualistic thinking has gotten us into a whole lot of trouble and folks, God does not take up residence in the absolutes.

Jesus knew this about us. How we think in these dualistic ways of wrong or right, in or out, clean or unclean and he challenged us at every turn to think differently. He tried to help us to comprehend that in the kingdom of God these human made categories do not exist.

The first will be last, the meek shall inherit the Earth, blessed are the poor. Everything that we think we know is not what he knew.

Richard Rohr put it this way. "We do need the dualistic mind to function in practical life to do our work as a teacher, a nurse, a scientist, or an engineer. It's helpful, and fully necessary as far as it goes, but it just doesn't go far enough.

The dualistic mind cannot process things like infinity, mystery, God, grace, suffering, sexuality, death, or love; this is exactly why most people stumble over these very issues.

The dualistic mind pulls everything down into some kind of tit-for-tat system of false choices and too-simple contradictions, which is largely what "fast food religion" teaches".

And then he adds “Once you have known grace, your tit-for-tat universe is forever undone: God is everywhere and always and scandalously found even in the failure of sin”.

When we think in these dualisms we miss all the depth, the richness, and beauty of creation as it actually is and we can do real damage. When we think only in the language of Good vs Bad, then we start thinking of others as good or bad, or ourselves as good or bad.

This is the root of our judging of other people and ourselves and we don't need to look far to see this simplistic view being played out in our nation as we bear witness to it in our politics and the way we treat each other.

When we write someone off as unworthy it is usually because we have made an over simplistic judgment based on our understanding of right vs. wrong.

How do we undo this in ourselves. When that little nerdy girl in me gets tied up in knots, I have learned to surrender to it, to let go of the need to have it all figured out and to trust God to know what I don't.

I also imperfectly attempt to catch myself when I begin to reduce anything down to good or bad. I try to practice empathy and compassion when I don't understand someone's behavior and disagree with their actions.

I remember all the times I have been so completely ignorant, all the times I have done something or said something that was hurtful and all the times I have made the wrong assumptions or misguided choices and have had grace extended to me by others and certainly by God.

But that takes a lot of work. When you grow weary, go back to this particular parable and contemplate God's immeasurable love for us. There is so much peace to be found in meditation on the infinite. When you surrender into this place of unknowing you are opening yourself to God in a whole new way. The Psalmist this morning said it this way

On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

Instead of letting it tie you into knots when you ask yourself who made God or where does the universe end and what is beyond that, just let go, breathe in God and sit in the presence of the mystery of the moment. Open your heart and mind, let go, and fall into the arms of the infinite Grace that is ours for the taking. AMEN

"ON THE GLORIOUS SPLENDOR
OF YOUR MAJESTY,
AND ON YOUR
WONDROUS WORKS,
I WILL MEDITATE."

Psalm 145:5



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