

Sermon: “The Gifts of God for the People of God”

Scripture: Psalm 46, Matthew 20:1-16

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Today’s morning Psalm has been loved by great theologians and musicians alike. Its opening verse has been paraphrased as “A mighty fortress is our God” by Martin Luther, Johann Sebastian Bach and Johann Pachelbel composed music based on this Psalm which highlights the underlying conviction that God rules the world. Let us trust in God’s Word and listen to Psalm 46.

Psalm 46 - ¹ God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. ² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; ³ though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. ⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. ⁵ God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. ⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; God utters God’s voice, the earth melts. ⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. ⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord; see what desolations God has brought on the earth. ⁹ God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire. ¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.” ¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Amen.

Today’s gospel text comes from Matthew 20:1-16. Starting in chapter 19, Matthew text is devoted to the new understanding of family and transitioning into today’s passage – new ethos for a Christian community. Known for its eschatological vision of “the last shall be first and the first last,”¹ let us listen for God’s radical love and reversal of cultural understandings in our community.

²⁰ “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶ 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?’ ⁷ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸ 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.’ ⁹

¹ Matthew 20:16

When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage.¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner,¹² 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.'¹³ 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?¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you.¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Amen.

Sermon: The Gifts of God for the People of God

Text: *Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Matthew 20:14*

Would you pray with me?

Almighty God, as we approach your Holy throne and open our hearts to discern your Word, may your Spirit bond us ever-so-tightly to hear the word you have for us this day. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Today's Matthew passage might come as a challenge, especially for those who still believe that the American Dream is still alive and well, for those who value honesty and hard work, and those who have made sacrifices along the way to be where we are today. Well, I believe that describes all of us at Westminster and majority of the people whom I have met. It does not matter how old you are – if you are a teenager dreaming of what you can become, or a young professional with ambitions to better oneself to make more money, or a parent juggling many different hats and overcoming what life throws at you, or as you are enjoying retirement and reminiscing both good and challenging times as you take delight in each day's gifts – our lives have a common denominator: to be treated fairly in all things. Fair grades, fair compensation, fair representation, fair responsibilities, fair treatment according to our needs. One can say our world is based on the system of fairness. Today's parable, however, challenges us to not only meet the expectation of fairness, but to rise from it to the higher standard of heavenly proportions.

As we take a closer look into today's passage, we recognize that the landowner makes a deal with the first group of laborers to be given a denarius, which is translated in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as the "usual daily wage." A denarius was an amount of compensation that was enough to feed a family for a day. It is not much but substantial enough to meet the needs of that day. Hence when the deal was struck early in the morning, it was a fair wage. The challenge arises when we begin to witness other laborers receive grace through the landowner's generosity. As the workers who arrived later, starting with the latest group of people who only worked for an hour, then three

hours, and followed by those who worked six hours, compared to those who worked nine and twelve hours, that they all were receiving the same amount of money. It tips our understanding of fairness and causes us to feel uneasy with this story. As we listen to the landowner's explanation, we learn that the landowner is not bound by the system of fairness but a different one.

In the economy of God, it is the system of grace through generosity that overtakes the system of fairness which we are so accustomed to. We must admit that there is uneasiness, even dare to say jealousy, when we witness grace through generosity to someone else. But as we take a step back and ponder about the heart of the landowner, we start to grasp the radial love of God that reaches more people than the people who are named in the story. The true benefactors of grace and generosity of the landowner are the family and community members of the laborers. They got to receive their daily needs. The community that is dealing with joblessness and hardship gets an infusion of hope. Although this act of grace and generosity by the landowner maybe a small gesture for some people, for others it can be good news which might outweigh all the negative things that were happening in their lives.

We all have been there at least once in our lives, being the benefactors of God's unfailing, radical love and grace. The waves of care and generosity through others that we have received during our darkest moments. The words of encouragement and hope that lifted us up out of the dark valleys within our minds to a place of renewed sense of purpose or drive to stand back up and try again. When our emotions were shaken, God has placed the right people at the right time to walk our journeys together. Most importantly, God has opened the right doors, fulfilling God's promise to all of us through God's holy Word. The real challenge to all of us is not whether we can accept a God who seems unfair due to abundant grace and generosity, but to see if we can *EMULATE* that radical love and be like the landowner to be a partner in the economy of God by utilizing a system of grace and generosity.

I have quickly fallen in love with Westminster and members of this faith community in less than two years, and I have learned a lot in that short period. I have learned that there are people with big hearts with big dreams, and whenever Westminster does something, we do it big and we do it right. I work with people who are grace-filled, generous hearts. Until I got to Westminster, I do not think I had the capability to think how we can be like the landowner in today's story. But we have already seen glimpses of such work in Westminster's history and in the hearts of those who participated in our recent works. Though the vision and contribution of last 20 years, Westminster had successful steadfast neighbor endeavor kick-off year during a pandemic! How do I measure success of our steadfast neighbor endeavor? I think the short, heartfelt testimony by our Elder Mark Vasconcelles at our session meeting this past week is a good measurement of success. Although I did not ask Mark if it is ok to share this, but I am sure he won't mind. Mark, who has been putting in countless hours overseeing the completion of our project

along with Gary Warnick our Property and Grounds Manager, was here at the church grounds, making sure everything was good, including the drainage after a heavy rain. One of the neighbors came up to him to ask if he was a church member. When he told the neighbor that he was, the neighbor said not only we are doing something good for the neighborhood, but the neighborhood considers Westminster as their church. Not just serving ourselves, but serving the neighborhood and sharing the gift of God with the people of God is taking place. It is not just Mark and Gary, but countless number of people have been pouring out grace and generosity through time, dedication, and financial gifts that has made this ministry possible.

Friends, we have been blessed by our generous God. Many of us have made it through this pandemic covered in God's grace. As COVID-19 has forced us to slow down, it has also gifted us time and rethink what we should value and how we should live out our lives during this time when abundant needs are around us. As Elijah encountered God in the silence,² let us take time in our socially distanced quietness, listening for and reading God's Word to discern how we can be a partner in God's work here and now. As Psalmist tells us this morning, let us be still and know that God is in control of all things. Let us work together to be more like the landowner of today's parable and share the abundant gifts of God that God has lavished on us for the people of God in the world. Amen.

² 1 King 19:11-13 "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; ¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. ¹³ When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"