

## **What you get and what you give**

A sermon on Matthew 20: 1-16 (Year A, Proper 20)

On the occasion of Calvary Episcopal Church's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary

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"Let's go around the room and introduce ourselves," the pastor said. Tony Robinson tells this story about a bible study group at his Congregational Church. As they went around the circle, people chimed in:

"I'm Jim, and I was married here fifty years ago, in 1958."

"I'm Evelyn. My grandparents founded this church, and I was baptized here in 1928."

"I'm Bob, and I joined the youth group in 1968."

"I'm Kelly, and we started coming in 1988."

Someone turned to Kelly and said, "Oh! You're a newcomer."

"Let's try that again," Tony said. "This time, say your name, and then tell us how being a disciple of Christ has gone for you this week." And suddenly these people who had been separated by a hierarchy of who's in and who's still out were united in one goal: serving Christ in the world.

I chose the readings for this morning, to reflect on the meaning of the church in history. Through them all runs the image of a holy building: a rock raised as a place of remembrance in the Jordan, a temple open to the awesome, uncontainable name of God, a believer standing firm on the foundation of Christ, a new city coming down from heaven. This gospel was chosen for me. It is the gospel for the week, the regular passage for the third Sunday in September. In it, the walls of the church become the walls surrounding a vineyard, a place where God teaches us how to grow the fruit of discipleship.

In Jesus' parable, the laborers who begin work at the beginning of the day are paid their fair wage, everything they expected from their employer. What scandalizes them is that others do not have to work for the same wage. Those who come late are paid the same, whether they arrive at noon or three or even one hour before the day is done. Shouldn't they have to earn their way like everyone else?

We want our history to show us a fair and orderly world, where those who work hard earn their reward and those who do not work receive nothing. We pay our dues, and we expect to gain privileges in return. Instead, Jesus gives us a startling image of a God who showers abundant blessings on everyone, whether they earn it or not. We hear God saying to us: Who are you to limit my generosity? Can I not do what I choose with what belongs to me?

We are all newcomers to God. We are new to creation, which began millions of years ago with the sudden, blazing birth of light. We are new to the great plan of salvation, which has been unfolding since humans first discovered their free will and used it to turn away from God. We are new to the story of the people of God, which began when Abram set out across the desert for his new land, and Moses took the Israelites out of Egypt and led them back to the Promised Land. We are baptized into a faith that began nearly two thousand years ago at the door to the empty tomb. We join a church founded by the first disciples when the Holy Spirit blew like wind through the upper room. We are nourished by the wisdom of countless prophets and teachers, mystics and monks. We draw on the heritage of the rebellious priests of England, who used the ambitions of the King to create a new church that spoke the language of the people. We receive the gift of the first American Episcopalians, who founded a democratic church for this new land of freedom. We did not, cannot earn the bountiful blessings of our history, but still they are ours to keep.

One hundred and fifty years ago, Joseph Adams and Edward Kimball founded a church to serve their families and the English and Scottish weavers who had moved to Danvers to work in the Tapley carpet factory. They negotiated the use of a space in the Danvers National Bank, and then put up the funds themselves to buy this land and erect the first church building. Since then, thousands of dedicated lay people and twenty priests, from Robert Chase through our beloved Oscar Swensen to my predecessor Richard Loring, have served this parish. They sacrificed long hours and generous gifts to build up this community and do God's work.

And in the eyes of God, it earned them: nothing. Nothing, because the grace of God cannot be earned. Nothing, because God's love comes to us the same way, whether we are a lifelong pillars of the church or perpetual outsiders. It earned them nothing, and yet it gave us everything.

Jesus teaches us that discipleship is not about what you get, but what you give. We pass on the faith, so that the next generation has a foundation in the great stories and wise teachings that draw us close to God. We build and rebuild this sanctuary, so that the next person to walk through the door will discover a beautiful, welcoming place to feel God's presence. We nurture a healthy, loving community, so that the next stranger to join us will easily find friends and companions on the way.

Our work in the church and in the world will not buy us a place in God's heart, because we are already there. As we turn to our next fifty years, let us help God open the doors and call all people in to the kingdom.