**Nu‘uanu Congregational Church, 2651 Pali Highway**

**United Church of Christ Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96817**

**Online Worship & Sermon September 20, 2020**

**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

Prelude *When We are in Deepest Need* (J. S. Bach) Katherine Crosier

Announcements Lori Yamashiro

Opening Sentences Paul Yamamoto

“For God so loved the world ....”

The most unimaginable action of God is the gift of all that grace and love brought down into this world in the person of Jesus, the Christ. The most unfathomable sacrifice made by God is the redemptive death of that love and grace on a cross for our sake and for our salvation. The amazing grace of God is ours. Let us receive God’s gift and worship!

Call to Confession Rev. Jeannie Thompson

We worship a God who is wise and just, and we know that we have fallen short of God’s glory. Yet our wise and just God is also gracious and merciful. God hears our prayers. In humility and trust, let us bring our prayers of confession to God, admitting those ways we have fallen short.

Unison Prayer of Confession

Gracious and loving Spirit, who moves freely and gracefully through this world, transforming and mending the broken pieces, we confess that we stumble through life, trying to survive on our own power. We feel paralyzed—numbed by fear, by old habits, by the effort we expend in trying to impress others. We try to earn your grace through our own awkward endeavors, forgetting that all that we are comes from you. In your mercy forgive us. Fill us with your liberating Spirit, that our souls might run, leap, and praise you, so that all the world would know your grace and truth. Amen.

A Moment of Silence

Assurance of Pardon

Friends, our Lord Jesus suffered death on the cross. In that act, the God of grace and glory said No—No to the powers of death, No to the sin that tries to hold us captive. And Christ said Yes to God’s promises throughout the ages—Yes to new life, Yes to hope and transformation. The Spirit of God anoints us with that hope and power. Friends, believe the good news of the gospel! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!

Passing the Peace

*In the safest way possible, please pass the peace of Christ to those who are with you.*

Gift of Song “*God So Loved the World”* Paula Yamamoto and Russell Ishida

A Reading from the Gospels Paul Yamamoto

**Matthew 20:1-16 *The Laborers in the Vineyard***

*‘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.’*

SERMON *“The Professor and the Parable”* Pastor

Like a lot of people, I have always found this to be one of the difficult parables of Jesus. This has not stopped me from preaching on it. For many years, I have trusted in the wisdom of others and have followed the predominant scholarship. This time, as I was preparing my sermon, I came across a few commentaries I had not seen before. My favorite was by a man who is a seminary professor in Atlanta, GA. He looked at this passage in terms of what it tells us about justice.

Rather than read this passage as an allegory or a parable, we should, says the professor, read it “as a straightforward account of the interactions between a landowner and the day laborers who work for him.”

According to the professor, this is not a lesson about the kingdom of heaven, nor a description of God. We can assume this, he says, because the results found in this story are so imperfect.

For example, instead of all happy workers, as he pays the laborers at the end of the day the landowner is confronted by jealousy among the workers who came early in the day. They complain and want to know why they should receive less than the ones who came only an hour before the end of the workday. Would God’s ways inspire such unhappiness? Would God intentionally make people so frustrated and envious?

As the professor points out, the ones who came early and worked all day *did* receive what was considered a day’s pay. However, in paying them only what others got (who did not work the whole day) the landowner undermined the first workers’ dignity and the worth of their labor.

We are also reminded that all of these people, these laborers, were among the most vulnerable in their time and place. They were not skilled workers. They did whatever kind of work was available, and they depended entirely on the employer to offer a fair wage, and make things right at the end of the day.

In the lives of such workers, the only power or agency they had in this arrangement was their ability to accept and go to work for a fair wage, or if they were desperate enough they could even take on a job knowing that the wages were *not* going to be fair. In both instances, they had the ability to make a choice. It was even their choice if they did not take the job; if they walked away with the dignity of knowing that what was on offer did not honor their desire for a fair day’s pay for an honest day’s work.

The professor goes on to talk about how there are still many people in the world like these laborers. He writes:

*“Day-laborers constituted a limitless and disposable fuel—bodies to be burned up—that made the ancient economy run. Our world is again full of such bodies, who make our clothes, produce our food, and assemble our electronic gizmos, yet never gain enough traction to be able to join the world of consumers. The parable thus pulls back the curtain on the ways our own world works, as it would have for Jesus’ audience.”*

The professor also takes issue with our tendency to assign the landowner the role of God in the story. What kind of God would sow jealousy and disunity among people as this landowner does among the laborers? Shouldn’t we expect God to compensate them on the basis of merit?

The professor concludes by telling the reader that this story teaches us to “read our world more critically.”

I could not agree with him more—we really should read our world much more critically. Further, I believe that when we read or hear this story proclaimed, we should allow ourselves to be reminded of the inequities in the way people are compensated throughout our country and the world. What is more: this parable should re-commit us to advocating and being in solidarity with people who must live and work in such an atmosphere of injustice. We should be angry and dissatisfied with an economic system that cares so little for the average worker. We should seek out or at least welcome the information that helps us to “read our world more critically.”

For example: according to the Economic Policy Institute, between 1978 and 2018, compensation for CEOs in this country rose 940%. What was the rise in pay for the average American worker during the same period, you ask?

12%

So, a big YES to the professor in Atlanta, GA who finds this story to be all too true of the world Jesus lived in, and the world as we know it, too. Another YES for him when it comes to the need for us to be much more critical about the way in which we read our world. A third YES to the implication that we are responsible for the conditions that surround us. We are. Unlike the workers we hear about in this parable, and the many workers we see every day in our own lives, we have agency.

So, the professor is right when he identifies some important problems in the way we live with each other. The problem is, the good professor…is also…wrong. He is just wrong when it comes to just about everything else having to do with this parable!

I could have let it go if the professor suggested that this story is also supposed to point us to the truths about our life in addition to being a parable. Unfortunately, in asking Jesus’ story to be about justice as it is expressed and experienced in human-to-human interaction is to entirely miss the point.

This parable was never intended to be about God’s *justice*. What Jesus was doing was telling the disciples about God’s *nature*. He was telling them about what they, and all others who come after them, can expect to receive from God.

In this world, we are always eager to get in “on the ground floor” with anything good that is coming out. Literally *billions of dollars* are spent inviting people to come and invest in the latest thing—come early, come *first,* we are told, before there is only a little left.

Remember the old saying: first come, first served? The implication is that if you do not show up early and fast it is going to be too bad for you because all the goodies will be gone. Indeed, in Jesus’ day (and to a certain extent in ours, too) it was thought that there was only a certain, and limited amount of anything you could care to name, up to, and including God’s love. Even justice was thought to be a finite product.

Jesus knew this. He had seen it all around him all of his life, and he was determined to proclaim a new thing that God was doing in the world, and among God’s beloved people.

What God was bringing into the world through Christ was a new kind of life, and new definition of justice and peace.

Jesus was telling the disciples a parable so that they might understand, and come to believe in and welcome, God’s grace.

That is what this parable is all about.

The nature of God’s being is grace. It is about a love that flows out from an everflowing stream to all who will receive it. It drenches the ones who have been wading in the water for many years, and the ones who have just begun to stick their toe in to see how it feels.

Does this feel unfair to you?

It does to a lot of people, but only because we want God to measure things the way we do. We want the good to get an extra reward, and the others to stand in line behind us.

Our Good News is that God is intent on giving people what they need, which is all the love, the infinite love God has for us.

In a way, the good professor is correct: we do not get what we deserve.

All I can say about that is: thank you, Lord!

Amen.

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION *Moderato* (Gabriel Voigtländer) Katherine Crosier

PASTORAL PRAYER

THE LORD’S PRAYER (in Hawaiian) Stan Chong

*We thank you for your faithfulness to the ministries and mission of our church.*

*Please send your offering directly to the church.*

DOXOLOGY Lianne Chung

**BENEDICTION**

We are loved by one God; we are redeemed by one Savior; we are empowered by one Spirit.

This week, as the people of God, let us love the unloved and unwanted, redeem the battered and tattered, empower the weak and powerless, that God may be glorified in this world, now and world without end.

Amen.

**POSTLUDE *Fugue on the Kyrie* (François Couperin) Katherine Crosier**