Turning the World Upside Down

Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 20:1-16

*Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me?*

*Matthew 20:15a*

I wish God didn’t do this to me. God created the perfect storm in which the gospel reading in this week’s lectionary provides one of the more disturbing passages for us to read, ruminate on, and apply to our lives. If I had my way, the lectionary would have us look at one of those feel-good passages I would rather focus on. After all, I have looked forward to being with you since Neal invited me to lead services for these three Sundays. It is a feel-good Sunday as well because you are welcoming back into your midst the not-so-prodigal son and daughter, David and Sandy. Of course, they won’t be around much, since David begins his interim at Pearl City next week. Nevertheless, it is good to have them back here. It’s a happy day.

But alas, the lectionary for the day turns our attention to one of Jesus’ most provocative parables, the so-called parable of the workers in the vineyard. When I monku to Jayne about this unfortunate turn of events, she sighs and reminds me, you know, Wally, you don’t have to preach on the lectionary. Yeah, I know, I always reply, but God must have a reason for the stars aligning as they do. She will then throw up her hands figuratively and leave me to my own devices. After 35 years of marriage, she knows better than to try and argue the point.

So here we are, left to deal with this puzzling parable and Matthew’s editorial comments on the passage. The parable is pretty straightforward: an owner of a vineyard goes to a place where day workers gather to be hired to work. Today, it might be a union hall, or as it is with migrant workers, a street corner where it is known you can find mostly minimum wage workers. The landowner agrees to terms with a number of workers and takes them to work in his vineyard. He goes back later in the day and finds the unfortunate ones who haven’t been able to find work. He agrees with them for the same amount for which he had hired the previous workers earlier in the day, even though, by then, it was afternoon. At the end of the work day, the laborers line up to get their day’s wages. A strange thing happens, however: the ones hired late in the day get paid first, and since it is out in the open, the first hired notice they are all paid the same, even though they worked longer and in the heat of the day. They don’t like it and complain: hey, how come we work ten hours, they work five, or worst of all just one, and we all get the same pay? No fair. The landowner gets in the face of one of the complainers: friend (it is translated friend, but there is nothing friendly about the word in Greek), *I’m paying you exactly what we agreed on and I am paying them exactly what I told them I would pay them. It’s my business, it’s my money. I can do whatever I want with it. Now take your agreed upon wage and get out of here.*

Stanley Saunders, who teaches the Christian Bible at a seminary in Atlanta, comments on this passage, saying: “*We are tempted to see the landowner in God-like terms because he is powerful, he hires workers all day long and pays them all equally, and he declares his own goodness and justice. We should remember, however, that at the end of the day the workers are all as vulnerable and powerless as they were at the beginning of the day, except that, we will see, they have lost their dignity, and probably their unity. The injustices are intensified, not overturned. 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.”* Dr. Saunders would have us resist the temptation to make the landowner a god figure, but offers the parable to the poor who compose his audience as a critique of the unjust way day laborers, the most vulnerable in that day, were treated. It is a word that applies as much today as it did then.

I remember when I was your pastor in the 1990s, I chaired the board of an organization called Homeless Solutions. We ran several transitional shelters, one for single men, another for section eight recipients, another for single women with children, etc, seven in all. It was a highly effective program where people eligible for the program were put on an eighteen-month program to get them into adequate housing and hopefully safe from the risk of becoming homeless again. Homelessness was a critical issue even back then. During Frank Fasi’s tenure as mayor of the city, he had the bright idea to build what he called Tent City in Aala Park. Some of you may remember. He asked Homeless Solutions to run it. We thought it was a ridiculous idea; who would want to live in a tent among tents in the middle of a city park? But our hands were tied. We received funds from the city among others to run the other shelters we had. We knew we couldn’t refuse. So, as the tents went up, and it was announced that Tent City would be open for occupancy, we were prepared for the intake, thinking no one would show up. At 12:01 a.m. when we started Tent City, we began processing applications, first come, first serve. The line had already snaked through much of the park. The first in line was a young local couple with three children, one still in diapers. They lived in their car, they told us. They, in addition to taking care of their family, both worked full time in hotels in Waikiki. They couldn’t afford to rent decent housing even then. Their heartbreaking story mirrored many of the others in line that night. They did everything the system asked of them and they couldn’t even make ends meet. If they sat in Jesus’ audience, they would understand what the day laborer in Jesus’ parable felt like when the landowner said, “Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I pay you what I agreed to pay you? Take what belongs to you and go. . .Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me?” (20:14-15)

Aside from the lack of fairness and compassion in the landowner’s words and attitude, there is one fatal flaw in his words. He doesn’t have the right to do what he wants with his money, simply because it doesn’t belong to him. For Jesus, nothing we have belongs to us, because it’s all God’s. It is no accident that Matthew places this parable immediately following Jesus’ encounter with the one we call the rich young ruler and his teaching about it. You remember the story: the sincere young man comes to Jesus wanting to know how to gain eternal life. Jesus asks, what does your faith teach you? Oh, the ten commandments, and I have followed them to the t. But something’s still missing. Jesus then tells him to sell everything he has and become his disciple. He couldn’t do it and went away saddened. Jesus is teaching us that when you think you have it all because you have a lot of money, a nice house, and lots of stuff, you follow the rules **and** you want a relationship with God as an add-on, you really don’t get it.

The parable teaches us that the landowner, who thought he had it all because he had the money and the power, really lacked the one thing that we all want and need. All that he thought belonged to him did not belong to him at all and could be gone in a nanosecond. Jesus taught us about that, too. He lived in an upside down world. What really counts, God in us, is something the poor can have and it cannot be taken away. It was good news for the poor, and it can be for us as well.

Jesus’ parable has much to teach us about how the world runs and what God asks of us in that world. Through this daring act of truth telling, Jesus exposes the rich and powerful for who they were. They may act as if, live as if, they have it all, but as Jesus told the rich young ruler I referred to earlier, *it is harder for the rich to get into God’s kingdom than a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.* God’s kingdom does not belong to them, but to all who recognize their need for God in their lives and follow the way of Jesus.