

Exodus 16:2-15 “What is it?...It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

Philippians 1:21-30 “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way.”

Matthew 20:1-16 “Take what belongs to you and go.”

Come along

O God of grace, grant us the wisdom, the strength and the courage to seek always and everywhere after truth, come when it may, and cost what it will.

Good morning! Welcome into this magnificent sanctuary of time and space and community that is Emmanuel Church. Welcome to you who are here for the very first time. Welcome to you who are returning here, having been away for a short time or a long time. Welcome to you who were here much of yesterday or the day before, or every day this last week. Welcome to you who have been here more Sundays than you could ever count!

It's wonderful to be with you. Welcome. I want to say welcome – in fact, I *need* to say welcome many many times because, as you may know, researchers have found that humans need five positive comments to psychologically balance every negative comment received. That would mean that I would have to say welcome something like 300 times to balance the message that you will hear a little later in the musical sermon that is Cantata 144, in which the choir is going to sing “gehe hin” (which means go away) a full 60 times in the opening chorus. (Thanks to Ryan Turner for counting that up for me!)

“Take what is yours and go away” is how Cantata 144 is known. I want you to laugh when you hear “Nimm, was dein ist, und gehe hin.” Of course, that is a line from our Gospel reading today – Matthew 20:14. It is the response of the landowner to those who have worked hard all day and are grumbling about not getting more pay than those who worked only a little, even though they agreed to the wage they were paid. They now feel indignant. (And who could blame them?) It's so like the classic struggle between older and younger children, between old-timers and newcomers, between workers and slackers. People tend to like or dislike this parable depending on how long and how hard we have worked in comparison to others. It's a parable that is often used to scold complainers. Take what is yours and go away is another version of “quit your belly-aching” or as my youngest daughter used to declare when treats were getting distributed, “you get what you get and you don't get upset.”

I understand the temptation to try to get people to stop grumbling about perceived inequity – especially when it comes to my own children. But I have to tell you that that line, “take what is yours and go” has got me thinking. That message is in direct conflict with the essence of Jesus' teaching in Matthew. There are things that just don't seem right about what the landowner says in addition to that. I've always been annoyed at the response that begins with “friend.” It sounds condescending to me. You know, when you're mad at someone who has some authority over you and you voice your complaint and the person puts a hand on your shoulder and starts with “friend” it's not going to go well. I want to shout, “you are not my friend.” Does anyone else have that response? And to the question, “Are you envious because I am generous?” I want to respond that one denarius (which is what gets translated ‘the usual daily wage’) is not generous. It's a subsistence wage that allows someone to eat for one day with nothing left over

for tomorrow – no cushion at all. It's the wage of poverty. So if the landowner is not really a friend and the generosity is not at all generous, what might be going on here?

To begin with, Matthew says, “for the kingdom of heaven is like....” And then there is a perplexing story. The perplexing part is not unusual, but it's a more involved story than usual in Matthew. Matthew has already had Jesus likening the realm of God to the opposite of common sense, of popular wisdom. The realm of God is like a scrubby mustard weed (as opposed to being like the tall cedars of Lebanon). The realm of God is like putrid lump of leaven (as opposed to the pureness of unleaven). The realm of God is a mixed up jumble of good and bad fish, of wheat and tares, of old and new treasures. Jesus has already announced that the realm of heaven includes the desirables and the undesirables. The realm of heaven, according to Jesus, is “subversive, unstoppable, invasive, a nuisance, urgent, shocking, and abundant. It requires action and commitment and inspires extreme behavior.”¹

According to Matthew, Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of heaven has gotten him run out of town just about everywhere he's gone. But I've always suspected that Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of heaven made his followers laugh. I've always suspected that Jesus' stories were hilarious to people who had little left to lose. I wonder if there's something funny here that would get Jesus and his followers in trouble, even though Matthew seems to be using the parable to teach his community how to get along in the second and third generation after Jesus' death.

You may know that Judaism has hundreds of parables which have to do with varieties and qualities and quantities of work and rates of pay.² There is a similar parable told by Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, a third century rabbi, that goes like this: A king hired laborers, and brought them into his garden. He hid and did not reveal what was the reward of working in the garden so that they might not neglect that part of the work for which the reward was small, and go and do only that part for which the reward was great. In the evening he summoned them all, and said, “under which tree did you work?” The first answered, “under this one.” The king said, “That is a pepper tree; its reward is one gold piece.” He said to the next, “under which tree did you work?” He said, “under that one.” The king said, “it is a white flower tree; its reward is half a gold piece” He asked a third, “under which tree did you work?” He said, “under this one.” The king replied, “That is an olive tree; its reward is 200 zuzim.” The laborers said to him, “ought you not to have told us the tree under which the reward was greatest?” The king replied, “If I had done that, how could all of my garden have been tilled?”³

In that story, it's clear (to me anyway) that the only way that all of the laborers can all benefit is to share their rewards just as they have shared in the work. I realize how difficult it might be, though, to get the one who got paid the whole gold piece to agree with me. That one probably started out feeling really lucky and then maybe began to feel that it must have worked out just as God intended for him to have worked under the pepper tree. Or maybe, looking back on it, he feels that it was his good instincts that led him to work under that tree in the first place, and to gain the whole gold piece as a consequence.

¹ Thanks to my seminary classmate Laurel Dykstra for this great summary. I use it all the time!

² Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod, eds., *Parable & Story in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p 72.

³ The quotation is from Midrash Rabbah on Deuteronomy 6:2, a ninth-century compilation, and is found in Bernard Brandon Scott's *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), pp 296-297.

For whom are these stories good news? For whom are they funny? Listen, Jesus says, the realm of God is like dandelions that a gardener planted on an immaculately sodded lawn. The realm of God is like a woman cooking a delicious vegetarian dish in pure lard. The realm of God is like someone who purchased center orchestra seats, and then the best part of the show took place in the back aisles. Maybe the realm of God – at least sometimes – is like Emmanuel Church! I think the chance for a belly laugh here comes when the landowner says “take what is yours and get out.” Because in the portion of Matthew right before this parable Jesus has just told the rich young man, sell what you have, give the money to the poor and come. What Jesus has been saying in the whole of the Gospel is give away what was really never yours to start with and come along to do the work that God invites you to do!

This parable is teaching something about grace. What I see is the grace in the invitation more than in the reward system. God’s grace is in the invitation to everyone – the calling is for everyone, no matter what the hour. Wherever you have been, however long you have been there, whatever you have done or failed to do, you are invited in to experience working in the realm of God, where there is no shame and no resentment. Imagine being invited to live for a time without shame and without resentment. “Impossible!,” you murmur. Jesus says, “no – not impossible. That’s what the realm of God is like. So don’t go away. Don’t take what is yours. Let what you have been given flow freely in and out of you. Stay and participate in the work of welcoming others who will come after you!”