

Proper 20 Year A
9/20/2020
St. Paul's Wilmington
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I want a new car. Those of you who have seen my car will not be shocked by this statement. It's small, and over 15 years old, and doesn't look like it has much life left in it, yet it keeps on going. During hurricane Florence I had hoped that my car would sustain damage giving me cause to go out and buy a new one. The first question I asked my sister who returned to my house a few days before I could was "is there a tree on the cobalt???" Unfortunately, there was not.

I have found myself at times pre-occupied with wanting more than what I already have. This of course is something that culture tells us, that the world tells us. We award salaries based on perceived value of the work being done in turn tying our own sense of worth to the things we have, or don't have because we can't afford them. We get a new phone and before long it's outdated and we want a new one, for over 1000 dollars. But reasonable or not, explainable or not, this desire for more than what we already have is a symptom of a disease; one of my mentors calls this Mammon Sickness. If you'll remember, mammon is one of two spiritual forces in scripture that stand in opposition to God; the other is Satan. This desire for more is one of those sinful habits that the world tells us is reasonable and normal, but that Jesus has come to heal us from this sickness.

In Jesus' teachings he is always finding ways to take the world as we know it and flip it upside down. Today's parable in Matthew is no different.

It starts out familiar enough, a land owner goes out and finds a few people to work in the vineyard; as the day continues he finds more people; the landowner doesn't need to do this, at least we're not told of a need, but the laborers do need the work. In many cities across this country we can find day laborers such as these, even in Wilmington and surrounding communities we will find them. So far, so good, nothing out of the ordinary, until it comes time to pay.

Those that worked a full day are upset, we can understand. Our time and our work is valuable to us. We get it. But that's precisely the point. We understand all too well; and Jesus says, we've got it all wrong. The world deals in fairness; but the kingdom of Heaven? The kingdom of Heaven deals in generosity. In fact, life itself is lived through generosity; just prior to this story Jesus remarking on the rich man who couldn't give up his possessions says that the way to life itself is through generosity, is through giving up of the things we claim to own.

If this is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like then at least two things are true: God's generosity, God's abundance out of which we all live, is unmeasured. It is not about fairness but instead about grace. The second thing? Jesus does not care about more or less. You got what you got. Period. A similar story was told in our reading from Exodus today: The quails and manna are enough for today; take only what you need to live for the day. Jesus is not interested in more or less. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, is about contentment with God's abundant generosity.

How do we live this out in our lives? For myself I have a hard time with this idea. The dream has been laid out there for me, the American dream of advancing of succeeding, of achieving. I'm a young man with a young family ready to climb the ladder of success; that's the dream that's laid out there for me and people like me; we need more because we're told we ought to have more. We're dissatisfied with what we have because we're told there's more out there for us. I give thanks to God each day for the blessings of my life, my family, my health, my home, St. Paul's and this vocation; and yet that nagging voice persists: "These last worked only an hour and you have made them equal." That nagging voice that say I'm unique, I've earned more and am entitled to more.

But there are real time effects of our desire for more; real harm done not only to ourselves but to others: (disparate effects economically from pandemic; particularly black and latinx americans a result of our wanting more at the expense of others)

Friends, Jesus tells me today, Jesus tells us today, that that is a lie. Moreover he tells us that that desire for more is not of God and the kingdom of heaven. It is this pervasive sickness, this sin that has crept into our lives. The good news: Jesus has come to heal us from it.

The story from Exodus and the parable of the laborers today invite us to see the way of contentment as the way of God, as an expression of our faith in a God who provides abundantly. All that we have is not ours, we live off of God's generosity and from that generosity we are invited to give. We are invited to not see it as our money, our home, our car; these are all God's and these are all enough for us. If we rid ourselves of this sickness for more, Jesus tells us, we will see abundance all around us, we will see we have all we need and more.

Now, we're not being asked to undertake financial irresponsibility, we're not being asked to become destitute. We're being asked to see, however, the world and the stuff in our lives as gift; not something we're entitled to, not money or things we've earned; it's all been given. When we start believing that, the fear that we won't have enough, or that there's not enough, fades away.

I hear that a lot around the church, that there's not enough money, that the most important thing is to save money. Folks this is fear speaking, God has richly blessed us for reasons God alone knows. To live in the way of Jesus to live in the way of eternal life is to live with this grateful contentment, seeing the miracle of abundance all around and giving freely of what we've been given. That is life lived in light of the kingdom of Heaven.

Sure, there are days I still look at new cars with envy, but I remain grateful, not least of all because the property tax on the car is less than the registration! But it does for me what I need it to today; I have what I need and will trust that the God we worship will always see to that. My prayer is that we can all live into this life a little more; and when that fear and that nagging voice in our head holds us back, I pray we are reminded of God's abiding grace in our lives.
Amen.