

Pentecost 15A

September 21, 2014

Rev. Ken Wratten at St Stephen's San Jose

Exodus 16:2-15

Israelites are provided quail in the evening, manna in the morning

Philippians 1:21-30

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard

Here is another one of those parables of Jesus that seems to have the primary intention of confusing us; a full day's wage for an hour's work; the first is last and the last is first; what do the wage practices of a vineyard have to do with how God works?

But of course the point Jesus was making was that how hard we work, or how long we have been at it, does not 'earn' for us the key to God's Kingdom. There is no way we 'earn' eternal life; that is not how it works. It is by God's grace alone, that we are allowed to live with God, in this life and in the next life. But we who hear Scripture readings all the time have likely already figured that out.

The flip side of that reality is that, presuming that you and I, through our faith, will meet up in heaven, we should start preparing ourselves now that we will see people we never expected to see there: some of those "last hour" people. That is comforting news to me for some people I have worried about. For instance, I have had some people talk with me over their grief and worry that a family member never went to church, never prayed, and never talk about God. They had real worry that if that loved one has never confessed Jesus as Lord, they would not be allowed into heaven.

This parable of the laborers in the vineyard says that God, and God's rules for dispensing mercy, refuse to be squeezed into a box; God refuses to even make logical sense, at least not using logic that we can understand. Some of the laborers worked a full 12 hour day; some worked only one hour; and all got the same reward. Is that 'logical'?

By this same reality about God's limitless grace, in heaven we will see some people we don't really think should be there. We will think, "Why should they deserve to be here?" But, then by that rationale I would have to find what I did in life that was so great that I deserve to be with God in heaven for eternity, more than someone else deserves it.

I guess it is better, after all, that being able to spend eternity in heaven should be grace-based. For instance, it should not be based on someone being really good with words, able to talk their way into God's good graces, convincing God of their 'worthiness'. Here would be an example:

Every afternoon two monks strolled in the garden of their monastery. One day as they were walking along a wooded path, one of the monks asked the other if he thought it would be a pleasant experience to have a cigarette as they continued on. The other agreed, but they decided they should ask the master of the monastery for his permission. The next day as they came out for their walk, one of the monks was smoking a cigarette and the other was not. "We agreed to ask the master," said the monk who was not smoking. "That is so, and I did," replied the other. "I asked for permission to smoke and was refused." "How did you ask?" "I approached the master and said, 'When I am walking and meditating in the garden is it all right if I smoke a cigarette?' and he said, 'Absolutely not!'" The monk smoking a cigarette replied: "You see, my brother, it is in the asking of the question that you were bound to be denied. I approached the master and said, 'Master, when I am smoking in the garden, is it all right if I meditate?' and he said, 'Certainly.'"

My brother Jim has always had a way of saying things that makes the rest of the family smile. That skill kept him out of trouble with mom and dad; not because he didn't act like a kid, and do the same crazy things Fred and I did, but because he had a better way of taking the tension out of the air when we got caught. When mom or dad would demand, "Why did you do that?" Jim's answer would bring smiles and a waving of their hands to say, 'That's Jim.' My answer would bring news that I was "Grounded". Do you know someone like that?

Today's parable says that the smooth-talking monk would not have a better chance of getting into heaven.

So based on our faith, we have the hope that we have received God's grace. I believe there is hope for the people who don't proclaim their faith, but God knows their heart; and I believe there is hope for those who don't have faith in God, but in that last second of life, seeing God's Holy Court laid out before them, they realize how real this God is, and how important their decision is; and God accepts their last second decision as fully as the decision from someone who has been faithful their entire life.

I have trust in this story from Jesus, that God's grace is generous, and people who figure it out at the last second receive God's full measure of grace.

I trust in Jesus' words to the criminal on the cross next to Jesus; 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'

I suggest that we keep ourselves from any judgment of who will get into heaven, but that we approach every person as though they are all eligible to receive God's full measure of grace. It will make for much better conversations when we see them in heaven. Amen.