

September 24, 2017
"A Life That Is Worthy"

Morning
Brood 

 Hawfields
Presbyterian
Church

(25th Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

How can we know if we're making a difference?
How can we know we're living a life worthy of
God's sacrifice for us?

Another way to look at it might be to ask what does it mean for a Christian to be spiritual, that is, in tune with God? As was alluded to last week, forgiveness is not just a nice by product of our faith, it is central, foundational. And at the heart of forgiveness is basic generosity. Whether it's the parable of the seeds (scattered wantonly) or the one for this week (a landowner who apparently has money to burn) God deals in abundance and generosity. But we live out lives of scarcity.

In other words, instead of assuming that there will be enough food, enough space, enough love, enough grace, we base our actions and decision-making on the idea that there isn't enough. Thus merit comes front and center to our notions of fairness. But God's grace isn't about fairness: it's about sovereign choice of generosity. There's nothing to earn. Nothing to prove. It's not free. But it is freely offered. No conditions. No crucible. No test. Just grace, met with suspicion and skepticism. How do we measure our worth in God's eyes? Not through position or merit or lucky circumstance.

We measure our worth through grace.



Philippians 1:21-30

21 Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better.

22 If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. **23** But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. **24** However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake. **25** I'm sure of this: I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith, **26** and to increase your pride in Christ Jesus through my presence when I visit you again.

27 Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel. **28** That way, you won't be afraid of anything your enemies do. Your faithfulness and courage are a sign of their coming destruction and your salvation, which is from God.

29 God has generously granted you the privilege, not only of

believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ's sake. **30** You are having the same struggle that you saw me face and now hear that I'm still facing.

- What do you think Paul means by what he says in verse 1?
- So is Paul just full of himself or is he referring to something else in verses 24-26?
- How is suffering for Christ's sake (v.29) a privilege?
- Is the whole passage about where Paul ends up (life or death) or about his position within God's will (serving Christ here or being with Christ then)?

Matthew 20:1-16

1 "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** After he agreed with the workers to pay them a denarion,^[a] he sent them into his vineyard.

3 "Then he went out around nine in the morning and saw others standing around the marketplace doing nothing.

4 He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I'll pay you whatever is right.' **5** And they went.

“Again around noon and then at three in the afternoon, he did the same thing. ⁶ Around five in the afternoon he went and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you just standing around here doing nothing all day long?’

⁷ “‘Because nobody has hired us,’ they replied.

“He responded, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’

⁸ “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the workers and give them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and moving on finally to the first.’ ⁹ When those who were hired at five in the afternoon came, each one received a denarion. ¹⁰ Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more. But each of them also received a denarion.

¹¹ When they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² ‘These who were hired last worked one hour, and they received the same pay as we did even though we had to work the whole day in the hot sun.’



¹³ “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I did you no wrong. Didn’t I agree to pay you a denarion?’ ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go. I want to give to this one who was hired last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Don’t I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you resentful because I’m generous?’ ¹⁶ So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last.”

Footnotes:

Matthew 20:2 A *denarion* was a typical day’s wage.

- Is this parable about what WE should be doing or how God operates?
- What do you think of the Landowner? Why?
- What do you think Jesus hopes people will do after hearing this parable? How are you planning to respond?

Commentary on Matthew passage by Debie Thomas

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1500-a-troubling-generosity>

Are you envious because I am generous? Writer Mary Gordon, in her book *Reading Jesus*, calls this “an impossible question, calling for an impossible honesty.” Because yes, she writes: “I am envious because you are generous. I am envious because my work has not been rewarded. I am envious because someone got away with something. Envy has eaten out my heart.”

I appreciate Gordon’s candor, because really, if this parable doesn’t offend us at least a little bit, then we’re not paying attention. After all, we know how the world is supposed to work. Time is money, and fair is fair. Equal pay for equal work is fair. Equal pay for unequal work is NOT fair. Where I live in Silicon Valley, technology start-ups often turn initial investors into millionaires, and why shouldn’t they? Surely those who took the biggest risks and worked the hardest in the beginning deserve to reap the

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

“...Paul is transparent here. He admits that he would personally prefer death to his current privations....But for Paul, the old real estate dictum, “Location is everything,” doesn’t apply. When it comes to selling houses and the success of restaurants, location is almost everything. But it makes little difference to Paul. He is able to claim joy wherever he is. Christ will be exalted in his body whether he lives or dies (1:20).” —**Alyce McKenzie**

greatest rewards. The early bird gets the worm. It’s only fair.

But God – if indeed the landowner in this parable represents God – is not fair. At least, not according to our cherished beliefs about fairness. This God, it turns out, does not believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. He isn’t interested, as we so often are, in showing favor to the best and the biggest and the brightest – the workers with the most elite educations, astonishing professional

achievements, or fanciest zip codes. This God is not obsessed with who deserves what. In fact, he doesn't even ask why some workers were able to start at dawn and others were not. All that he's obsessed with is making sure that every last person gets a place in his vineyard – the early bird and the latecomer, the able-bodied and the infirm, the young and the old, the popular and the forgotten.

In case we're tempted to relegate the economics of this story to first century Palestine, let's consider its implications again. Why did some laborers end up unemployed until 5pm? The parable is very clear: because no one would hire them. Perhaps they weren't as literate, educated, or skilled as their competition. Perhaps they had children to care for at home. Maybe they had transportation difficulties. Maybe they were disabled, or didn't have greencards, or suffered discrimination. Whatever the case may be, the landowner doesn't ask these laborers to defend themselves. He just makes sure that every worker ends the day with the

dignity and security of a living wage – the capacity to go home that night and feed his family.

"Are you envious because I am generous?" asks God. Or literally, in the Greek: "Is your eye evil because I am good?"

It embarrasses me to admit this, but ever since I was a little girl, I have always assumed, when hearing or reading this parable, that I would have been one of the 6:00am workers in the landowner's vineyard. Of course I'd be first in line and ready to go before the sun came up. Of course I'd work the hardest and the longest. Of course I'd be the most deserving of the landowner's praise. After all, I'm Type A! I'm a good girl! I'm a "J" on the Myers-Briggs and a 6 on the Enneagram! I'm a perfectionist! And a people pleaser!

But consider this: the parable reads very differently if you situate yourself at the end of the line. The workers who got more than they expected to – the ones who received more pay than they thought they deserved – were ecstatic at the

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

“Signs of God’s abundant, radically-reorienting generosity are scattered like seeds throughout Matthew... [they] all show how the kingdom of heaven is characterized by a different economics than our earthly societies, in which the rich get richer and in which “God” only helps those who help themselves. The kingdom of heaven is not a rat-race; rather, it is Sabbath abundance.”

**—Chris Liu-Beers
NC Council of Churches**

end of their workday. Ecstatic, stunned, thrilled, and grateful.

What they experienced that day was pure blessing, and I’ll bet that what went on at their end of the line was one big raucous party.

But all the other stuff? The envy? The bitterness? The grumbling? The dissatisfaction? Those belonged to the “deserving” folks at the front of the line.

Though the landowner had honored his agreement with them, though they had received their daily bread, though they lacked no good thing, they spent their off-hours consumed with frustration and anger. “Is your eye evil because I am good?” the landowner asked them. Maybe, if God’s generosity offends us so much, it’s because we don’t have eyes to see where we actually stand in the line of God’s overflowing grace and kindness.

I find it instructive that the landowner insisted on paying the workers in reverse order, thereby making sure that the first workers saw what the last received. How much easier it would have been to pay the all-day laborers first, sending them home before they could see what their “less deserving” counterparts received. But no, the landowner wanted them to see what kind of vineyard he ran. He wanted them to experience radical generosity. He wanted them to surrender their envy and join the party....

Commentary on Philippians passage by Christian A. Eberhart

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2180)

commentary_id=2180

...Our pericope starts with the following sentences: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Philippians 1:21-23, NRSV). When hearing such a statement, some might be impressed by Paul's religious enthusiasm. Others may feel uncomfortable or might even want to accuse the apostle of boasting. I feel compelled to ask, "Are you sure, Paul, you don't hang on to life more than that?" What kind of principle is "dying is gain" anyway?

Most of our modern culture is dominated by countless efforts of making life more gratifying and fulfilling while eliminating the threat and experience of death. We tend to admire people who succeed in life or who live their lives to the fullest.

There are not many role models for the idea that "dying is gain."

So how could the Apostle Paul make such a statement some 2,000 years ago? We find the answer first in his situation of imprisonment mentioned above. It came with the potential of death, and thus it was only appropriate for Paul to reflect on death instead of adopting a state of denial. We encounter the result of his reflections in verse 23: "my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."

Second, it is clear that Paul's reflections hinge on the presence of Christ. Paul is absolutely certain that death is not a transition into a state of non-existence; hence, he is not afraid of it. Paul does not doubt at all that death can only be the moment when he will be united with Christ. This is a faith perspective the apostle has developed earlier: "... we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8 NRSV).

The test of such faith comes in a situation of impending death, be it in the first century C.E. or more recently. In the spring of

1945, the last message written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer before his execution in a concentration camp in Nazi-Germany demonstrates a similar kind of confidence: "... for me this is the end but also the beginning. With him (sc. the bishop of Chichester to whom this message was addressed) I believe in the principle of our Universal Christian brotherhood which rises above all national interests, and that our victory is certain."

For our perspectives on death, the centeredness on the resurrected Christ can make a big difference. It turns typical human perspectives on life upside down. Attitudes of 'living life to the fullest' suddenly become questionable. The quest for more material possessions suddenly becomes vain. In the Letter to the Philippians, Paul turns his attention instead to the people who had gathered around him to hear the message of Christ. He wants to be their servant. He therefore makes a few recommendations on how followers of Christ should live (1:27-30). His words convey expectations of an

endearing relationship between the members of the congregation in Philippi, who are to be "standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).

...Those called "Christians" should always strive to learn more about the person after whom they are named.

Additional Thoughts

- What is the defining characteristic of your faith? What is it about your faith life that clues people into the fact you are following Jesus Christ?
- "Matthew's placement was significant. In the larger narrative sequence, this "parable" was exemplified. For example, in the preceding story (cf. 19:23-29), Peter claimed, "we have left everything and followed you" (19:27). This kind of dedicated service to Jesus will reap a reward (cf. 19:28), but these rewards are not just for the immediate disciples but for all who have followed, since "many who are first will be last" (19:30). In like manner, in this week's story, special privileges were downplayed."
–Emerson Powery