

Title: Misunderstandings & Parables
Date: 9/24/2023 (Proper 20, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16](#)
Video Link: https://youtu.be/yJ_vj_C6aXc?t=1348

We give you thanks, O God, and call upon your Name;
we make known your deeds among the peoples.
We sing to you; we sing your praise
and speak of all your marvelous works.
We glory in your holy Name;
let the hearts of those who seek you rejoice. (Ps 105:1-4, The Saint Helena Psalter)
Amen.

How many of you have been at the ordination of a priest?
There is usually a line of people waiting to be blessed by the new priest.

There are two reasons for this.

The first has to do with our view of baptism. In our tradition, we celebrate the priesthood of all believers. The Rev. Fran Toy, the first Asian American woman to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, shared that when people ask her how long she's been in ministry, she says, "I was baptized in such-and-such year."

This idea is reinforced right before the priests are ordained. The bishop reminds them, "As a priest, it will be your task to proclaim by word and deed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to fashion your life in accordance with its precepts. You are to love and serve the people among whom you work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor" (BCP 531).

The first time I read those words in the Book of Common Prayer, I thought, "Well, those are promises that we all make at baptism. You don't need to be a priest to do any of that."

There are really only three things that are designated for priests. Some call them the ABCs, and they happen every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

We absolve- we declare God's forgiveness after the confession.

We bless- we pronounce God's blessing.

We consecrate- we celebrate the mysteries of Christ's Body and Blood.

To be clear, priests do not have magic hands. God works through us, with the consent of God and God's people. Priests are a stand in, a placeholder. Jesus is the presider, the celebrant; you look through us to see him, to see God, to see the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit, **and** to see each another.

That's the long explanation of reason #1; there might be a line because this is the first time anyone could have asked the new priest for a blessing.

Reason #2 is, uh, a little less rooted in the Book of Common Prayer. Someone told me, that someone told them, that the newly ordained are at the peak of their connection with God. The most powerful blessing they can offer is the one offered at their ordination.

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

This is beautiful because I imagine the new priests are walking on air because they’re FINALLY done with school and internships and tests and interviews. Now they can ACTUALLY do the things they went to school for. They are full of hope and joy and promise.

This is also a little depressing because of what it implies about priests who’ve been in ministry for longer. Does this mean that their ministry went downhill after their ordination? that their faces no longer shine as bright from more recent encounters with God? that their absolving, blessing and consecrating become pale and stale?

On a side note, I was ordained a priest in November 2019. I’ll leave it up to you to decide where I fall on that scale.

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

The laborers hired early in the morning grumbled when they saw that they were paid the same amount as those hired at the eleventh hour of the workday.

They didn’t complain because the landowner didn’t pay them the amount they expected; he paid them exactly the daily wage they agreed to.

They complained because, “These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

Today, we hear echoes of this kind of grumbling.

“My family came into this country the right way.”

“I paid my student loans.”

“I earned this.”

“Hard work got me here.”

“Why do good things happen to bad people?”

These complaints come with a side of righteous outrage. This is not what they expected justice to look like.

These statements don’t just reflect the belief, “I deserve what I have.” Implied in that statement is a judgment about someone else. “**They** haven’t put in the work; **they** don’t deserve that.”

This ignores the fear and anxiety experienced by the workers who had to wait longer. The certainty of work & wages is worth something, next to the uncertainty of no work. Had they been the ones chosen later in the day, they probably wouldn't be grumbling about the landowner's generosity.

This ignores the fact that the landowner's generosity isn't costing them anything. They're working from a fixed pie mindset when there are no limits. They're fighting with each other because that feels more manageable than trying to change the structures and policies that produced this mindset and these conditions in the first place.

There's a sense of self-interested calculation, like in Peter's mind when he asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive before he could call it done.

The workers hired at the beginning of the day demand to know the formula. How is the landowner measuring input and output?
How is the landowner assessing the value of their work?

The answer is...that's not what this is about.

Professor Andrew McGowan, dean of Berkeley Divinity School, points out that "Jesus himself taught that parables are offered not to reveal, but to allow misunderstanding... they allow and expect willful or unacknowledged incomprehension. Misunderstanding is not failing to know the answer, but avoiding it."¹ The way we misunderstand the parable, or to be generous, the way understand it only in part but not in full, says a lot about our concerns and our priorities.

He gives these examples:

A person can use this parable to argue that owners should get to decide what to pay workers, not the government, not the unions.

A person can use this parable to argue for the concept of a universal basic income.² This is the idea that everyone should receive a payment or some kind of credit without meeting any kind of work requirement or income threshold.

A person can use this parable to talk about the concept of having a "usual daily wage" and the gap between the minimum wage and an income people can actually live on.

Whether these are teachings we can or should take away from this parable depends on how closely they align with what Jesus said and did, and with the way his disciples made meaning out of his words and deeds. These imperfect understandings are still valuable because they help us stop and reflect. With this deeper awareness, we can live with more intention and see with God's eyes and be God's hands and feet in this world.

One definition of theology, the study of thinking and speaking about God, is "faith seeking understanding."³ We try our best to understand. Each parable resonates differently depending on our experience with that metaphor- sowing seeds, forgiving a child, throwing a banquet, losing someone in our flock.

These kinds of “misunderstandings” can be valuable. Sometimes it’s what we need to keep going; sometimes it’s what we need to turn around. A misunderstanding can be a bad understanding, one that leads us farther away from loving God and our neighbors. A misunderstanding can also be a partial understanding, one we stop at because we’re not ready for what it means to live in the kingdom of heaven.

In the kingdom of heaven, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

We are not any better in the eyes of God, more pure or more saved, whether we are descended from generations of Episcopalians, or come from another Christian tradition or no faith tradition. It’s helpful to be steeped in the knowledge that goes with this tradition, and it’s helpful to come at all this with fresh eyes and ears, and an open heart.

We are not any better in the eyes of God, more pure or more saved whether we were baptized as an adult or are still trying to wrap our mind around this whole Jesus thing. On one hand, it’s helpful to be swept up in the excitement and conviction of someone who has found a new thing that they wish they had always known. On the other, as we read in the *Sacred Life of Bread*, doubt is to faith like seasoning and heat is to bread; it can enrich and enhance. I like to say that God called me to be a priest not because I’m better at following Jesus, but because God knows I need to be more immersed in all this/on a tighter leash than other people do.

In the kingdom of heaven, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Doing more stuff does not earn us a greater reward. In the eyes of God, our value, our worth, doesn’t come from doing. Working more, hustling harder, staying at work longer, doesn’t make us any more precious in the eye of God.

This goes against everything many of us have been taught in our families, at school and at work. This may cause us to look at what we define as success and why. This may cause us to look at what it means for us to have enough, to be enough.

You may even ask, if there’s no point system, what’s the point? The point is to fully live into who we are and who God is calling us into being, into becoming. The point is to be salt and light, to realize that we can change the world around us simply by being us, by being present as our fully wonderful and messy and complicated selves. The point is that life, life in God and with God, isn’t about points or keeping score; that’s not success.

Success looks like trusting that God will “give us this day our daily bread.” The Israelites complained that they would rather be enslaved and satisfied (those are some powerful rose glasses) than free and hungry. Then God gave them bread, but they didn’t recognize it at first, and in another version of this story, they try to stash away more than they need on a day other than the sixth day, but the extra manna goes bad.

The grace of God is ours every day, but we have to find a way to wrap our minds and our arms around it. The grace of God isn’t ours to keep, but it **is** ours to give away, to share in forms that others can recognize, like in a bag of necessities, or a loaf of bread.

And if we have faith that God will always provide, then maybe someday we can live without the fear of falling short, without the fear of that we are not doing enough, that we are not enough. We don't have to strive to be **more**; we just have to live as we already are, because the abundance and grace and love of God are already in us, thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ <https://abmcg.substack.com/p/into-the-vineyard-the-last-will-be>

² <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-u-s-could-help-solve-its-poverty-problem-with-a-universal-basic-income>

³ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anselm/>