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Proper 20, September 20, 2020
Matthew 20:1-16

The Episcopal priest and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, said this in her book “An Altar in the World:”

“The problem is, many of the people in need of saving are in churches, and at least part of what they need saving from is the idea that God sees the world the same way they do.”

Today’s parable in Matthew’s Gospel clearly challenges us to see that God’s ideas are not the same as ours. It’s a confusing parable. It doesn’t make any sense to us. It’s not fair. I was talking to my sister on the phone this week and mentioned that this was the reading for today. She said, “Oh I hate that one. It’s too hard!” It is hard. It brings to mind for me the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Is 55:8-9)

Thank God that God’s ways are not our ways. Our ways bring us to statistics like this:

- 1 in every 6 individuals lives in poverty and struggles with hunger in the greater St. Louis region, including more than 172,000 children. (Operation food search)
- Black individuals in the St. Louis MSA are more than three times as likely to be in poverty as white individuals. (Onestl.org)
- In the St. Louis region, the mean household income of the highest fifth (\$216,474) is more than 15 times larger than the mean household income of the lowest fifth (\$14,357). (Onestl.org)

Today's parable is so challenging because our thoughts tell us that these statistics are the result of merit. Hard work pays off and we get what we deserve, what we work for. But that is not the landowner's concern in this story of the kingdom. The landowner is concerned only that each worker get his daily bread, enough to feed the household for one day. The landowner undermines the competition between workers, the sense of worthiness of some over others. According to our way of thinking the landowner is being unfair. Those who only worked a short period shouldn't get the same amount as those who worked all day. But the landowner IS treating them equally because his metric, his measure of justice is that each worker have what he needs to live.

The workers who think they deserve more complain about this. They cry, "You have made them equal to us." Yes, in God's ways that is the spirit of justice. God's thoughts do not center on winners and losers, superior or inferior. God's ways center on the dignity and the worth of each and every one of God's children. Jesus tells us in this challenging story this morning that what matters to God is that everyone receives their necessary "daily bread."

That has been God's concern from the very beginning. In our reading from Exodus this morning we find the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, hungry. God is creating a new people who will not live according to the ways of Egypt – ways of domination and submission, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. God teaches them a new way with the gift of manna. Bread. Their daily bread. That is God's concern. God gives them what they need for each day. It is not to be hoarded or distributed according to might or power or labor or any other distinctions. In fact, when people try to gather more than their daily share, it goes bad, foul and worm-ridden. This manna is not just for the privileged few, not for the strong and the skilled with crumbs left over for the weaker ones. It is just what God desires for each person – enough.

Our market driven economy doesn't speak the language of "enough." Instead it speaks the language of more and never enough. As followers of Jesus we live in the tension between God's ways and our ways, God's thoughts and our thoughts. We can't change an entire economic system ourselves. And even if we wanted to, there isn't one human economic system that is perfect because our ways are not God's ways. But if we get too comfortable with our ways, if we start to believe that God sees the world the same way we do, if we stop experiencing the tension and the discomfort in the gap between the reign of God and our reign, that is when we are in danger of being lost.

My sister is right. This is hard! We would rather look away from the inequity that surrounds us. We would prefer to believe we deserve what we have. It's much more comfortable to lay the blame for poverty at the feet of the poor. But that is not what Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven is about. It is about unmerited grace, unbounded generosity. And it is hard for us to grasp. But we don't do it alone. We learn to live generously, to be grateful, to stop begrudging others who receive unmerited generosity, only by the grace of God. Jesus promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us understand this new creation and to live according to different values. The reality is that the values of Jesus and the values of the marketplace are in tension and that is a good thing.

May we live in the tension between what IS all around us and what CAN BE if we see with the eyes of God. May we live with gratitude for what we have instead of longing for more. May we never begrudge a handout but instead rejoice in the generosity that is the hallmark of the Kingdom of God. And when we pray "give us this day our daily bread" may we pray as Jesus taught us that the basic daily needs of all may be met. This parable calls us to try, hard as it is, to grasp the generosity of God and to be transformed by God into a people of gracious generosity.