

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Matthew 20: 1-16

Entitlement, Envy, and God's Love

How many people grew up in a family with a younger brother or sister? Raise your hands.

So, I have a story about my younger brother that I bet many of you will relate to.

In the early 1960s, when I was eight and my brother Kilburn was six, we got an allowance from our parents. I think the idea was to teach us about responsibilities within the household. It was the magnificent sum of 25 cents each week *if* we did our chores.

And out of that amount, we had to buy our own comic books. They cost 12 cents each then.

Sounds like not a lot, and even thinking about inflation, it wasn't. Twenty-five cents in 1963 is worth \$2.11 now. That does not buy even one comic book today.¹

So, I resented the fact that my brother got the same allowance I did. Especially because in summer, we were supposed to rake the grass after it was cut. And in the fall, we were supposed to stack the wood cut for the fireplace.

Kilburn was small even for his age. He could not do even half the physical work I could.

So, I complained strenuously to my parents.

Why does Kilburn get the same allowance? I do all the work!

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel reading.

This passage in Matthew, chapter 20 verses 1 through 16, is rich in many meanings. Whole books have been written about it.²

I want to focus on one aspect, because I think it is very pertinent to our experience of life today. And, as examples, both the covid virus and the ongoing discussion about racism in America.

And the thought is, why do we think that we deserve more of God's love than, air quotes, "people who are late to the party?" Like the field workers in Matthew Chapter 20.

For me, I think I often fall into the trap that I *deserve* God's love because I work so hard to earn it.

¹ The median price of a comic book today is \$3.99.

<https://www.comichron.com/vitalstatistics/mediancoverprices.html>, accessed on September 18, 2020.

² R. T. France. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Eerdmans, 2007; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, Eerdmans, 1999; Karl Jacobson, "Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16,"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1046, accessed September 10, 2020; Emerson Powery, "Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16,"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2157, accessed September 10, 2020.

After all, I think about the Golden Rule all the time. I pray to God for help in my behavior.

And it is so hard. I fail, every day, many times every day, to love my neighbor as myself.

I bet you do, too. Do you swear in the car at someone who cut you off? Are you snarky when the service is slow at Starbucks?

So, you know, days when I do *not* do this, when I do love my neighbor, I give myself a checkmark. And when I do, sometimes I think: Jesus would approve of me today.

I earned his love.

And then there is the flip side. You're been standing in the check-out line, patiently and politely. Then someone joins the line behind you just as a clerk opens the next cash register and beckons her over.

Wait a minute! Why does she get to do that?

Okay, so let's talk about two ideas.

The first idea is the assumption that we each can, air-quotes again, "earn God's love." And the second idea is that some are more worthy of salvation than others.

Scripture is very clear that this way of thinking is the ultimate misunderstanding of God.

As both Paul and the Gospels make clear, there is nothing any of us could do that would *earn* the gift granted us through Jesus.³ (Sorry, Methodists.)⁴

Romans chapter 3 gives us the succinct summary: "The righteousness of God... is... for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁵

Plus, God's love, conveyed through his son, is not zero-based.

God *does not* have a finite supply of love. Think about it. Through his person of Jesus, he created all of the cosmos.⁶ An unbelievable expanse of space and time. And he created all living creatures. You have to think hard about the idea of infinity. And when you do, you are overwhelmed by the thought of God.⁷

³ Mark 16:16 ("The one who believes and is baptized will be saved"); John 3:15 ("whoever believes in him may have eternal life"); Acts 10:43 ("everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins"); (Ephesians 2:8-9 ("For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast.")).

⁴ To be fair, Methodists do agree that we are all saved as a result of Christ's martyrdom. But many seem to think you can fall out of salvation by subsequent bad behavior. See "Do United Methodists believe 'Once saved, always saved?'" <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-do-united-methodists-believe-once-saved-always-saved-or-can-we-lose-our-salvation>, accessed September 10, 2020.

⁵ Romans 3:22-24.

⁶ John 1:1-16.

⁷ "[F]or through him [Jesus] God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him." Colossians 1:16 (New Living Translation).

God loves me. And God loves you. He does not have a small gas tank of love. He has a gas tank that is the size of all of his creation. He can love me intensely and completely and love you just as much.

Which brings me back to the second thought I mentioned earlier. I suspect lots of our interactions with each other are premised on the idea that our good behavior should earn us something from God that others should not get. At least until they behave well.

That seems to be the gist of the complaints of the field hands in today's Gospel reading.

"I worked harder. I deserve more. The latecomers are not as worthy as I am."

This way of thinking ignores the profoundly important fact that Jesus died to save *all* of us. Romans chapter 5 makes this clear. "[W]hile we were still sinners, Christ died for us."⁸

Salvation is a gift to everyone.

But it is also important to understand that in order to receive forgiveness ourselves, we must also forgive the sins of others. C. S. Lewis explained it this way:

We believe that God forgives us our sins; but also that He will not do so unless we forgive other people their sins against us. There is no doubt about the second part of this statement. It is in the Lord's Prayer, it was emphatically stated by our Lord. If you don't forgive you will not be forgiven.⁹

How does this relate to our lives today?

Many, many people are rethinking positions they previously held. Are we going to shame them for being late to the party? Will we feel superior because we knew the right answer all along? Or will we welcome the new arrivals to the community of people trying to do the work God has given us to do?

Think about our individual and collective response to covid-19. Much more is known now than six months ago about its dangers. There is constant commentary about whether the sacrifices required to cope with the crisis are equally shared. Are we going to point fingers at people who were slow to understand the dangers, or are we going to work together going forward to be safe together?

Think about the growing awareness of systematic racism in our country and its effects. Many of us were in denial until recently. Some still are. Can we forgive each other and find ways to come together for positive action?

As we deal with life here in 2020, can we remember the lesson of Matthew 20?

As a closing thought, I'm going to do something that I bet is unusual for a sermon preached by an Episcopalian. I'm going to quote the Pope. Two years ago, meditating on the questions we've discussed this morning, Pope Francis concluded:

⁸ Romans 5:8.

⁹ C. S. Lewis. "Essay on Forgiveness," NY: Macmillan, 1960.

<https://www.graceseattle.org/uploads/documents/Forgiveness-Essay-Lewis.pdf>, accessed September 10, 2020.

God's first step towards us is that of an anticipated and unconditional love. God loves first. God does not love us because there is some reason that causes love. God loves us because He Himself is love, and love tends to spread and give by its nature.¹⁰

Amen.

¹⁰ Hannah Brockhaus, "We don't earn God's love - it's freely given, Pope Francis says," Catholic News Agency, June 14, 2017, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/we-dont-earn-gods-love-its-freely-given-pope-francis-says-37480>, accessed September 10, 2020.