

Positively un-American

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar
at the nine o'clock service September 18, 2011, The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16.*

I just spent a few days with my grandchildren, twins 8, and their brother 5. I didn't discuss this gospel with them—in truth it just didn't come up; but if I had told them the story of how these workers, some working all day, some just a couple of hours, each got the same amount of pay, their response undoubtedly would have been "that is not fair, Granddaddy." Already at their young and tender ages, they have learned enough to know that the economy of this story doesn't make any sense.

Jesus also knew that, which is why he told it. "The kingdom of heaven is like this," Jesus began. What followed blew the minds of those who heard it—just as it does ours. In my world, the world of church types, most people, though we rarely admit it, find this gospel irritating. We never say it, but our reaction is similar to the feeling we have about the Prodigal Son, the one who didn't do right but still got the ring and the robe and the fatted calf. For you see, although we think we should believe it, we actually have trouble accepting that non-believing, misbehavers are not only loved by God as much as we are but also that they get all the goods of God's love that we get. It is tough to believe, and, yet, Jesus said, "the kingdom of heaven is like this." It is not getting what we deserve; it is getting what God wants to give us—the love and providence of God.

Now to be honest, the longer I live, the better this sounds. Deep in my soul, I know that getting what I deserve might not be as grand as it might appear. While that may seem self-effacing, if not self-serving, and maybe both, it is not. It is just the truth about God and me, and pardon the arrogance, but I dare say, the truth about God and you as well. We are loved, yes even cherished by God as the apple of God's eye, simply because we are the children of God, not because we deserve it.

Part of the challenge for most of us is that we are people who are used to being if not at the front of line, far from the back. It is a good to remind ourselves that most of us started lives from an easier vantage point than many. The playing field is never even, not really. I was born a middle class kid with educated parents, who wanted me to do well. I was never hungry, not once, no matter how many times I said, "I'm starving", and I always had the advantages—and there were a lot of them—which the luck of my birth afforded. A good work ethic, comfort in a system the workings of which I understand, ambition and belief that getting ahead is good—these attributes came easily for many of us not because we are good and deserving of them but because they are the air in which we have lived and breathed and in which we have been formed.

Though we know this sociological truth intellectually, it is difficult to truly absorb it into our lives because our lives are "all about us;" and we begin to believe even in our spiritual journeys, that hard work will lead us to being better spiritual beings, even more worthy. The fact that there is some truth in that makes it all the more complicated; we do "work" at our spiritual journeys for good cause and to good end. But most of the work is in coming to understand that the spirituality we so deeply desire already resides at the center of our being and is approached not by establishing over and over how good we are or how hard we work or how selfless we are but by resting in nothing but the love of God and the overwhelming mystery that God loves us as we are.

Add to that spiritual conundrum a national consciousness that affirms individual success and mythologizes the notion of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, the notion of American exceptionalism, and what we have is a nation that upon hearing this gospel says, "that is totally un-American."

This gospel, initially a story, albeit it a dramatic, and extravagant one, to demonstrate the love of God for all people regardless of our system for establishing worth, becomes, as all of Jesus' teachings do, a story about how we relate to others, about Jesus insistence that we get real, that we live with our eyes and hearts wide open, not dulled by our good luck but moved by its essential lack of fairness toward compassion and generosity for others,

who are less lucky than we.

One of the most annoying idioms of our present day culture is the phrase, “I am so blessed.” When I hear some one in the face of great abundance and wealth and happiness say, “I am so blessed,” I want to scream. What are we saying when we make such statements? So if God has blessed us with wealth, brilliant children and happiness, what does that mean for others who don’t have that story? They are not blessed? So are they cursed? Wouldn’t it be better to say, “I’m really lucky or fortunate,” or “I was standing in the right place at the right time,” or something.

In his op-ed piece yesterday, Charles Blow in *The New York Times* reports a disturbing trend. When the data released just last week by the Census Bureau is parsed, what we find is that poverty among working age adults, 18-64, is higher than it has been since President Johnson began his “war on poverty” in 1964. And even more troubling, three out of four Americans in poverty work. They just can’t make ends meet. Even if some dark part of us is inclined to think, “‘they’re’ slobs and ‘they’ don’t work,” it is not true. ‘They’ work, often two jobs, but it is not enough.

In the mystery of the continuing power of revelation, this ancient passage is pitch perfect for our era. It forces us to think about the union of the physical and the spiritual. Jesus, quite unlike his followers, our own tradition not excepted, did not pine away for the next life. Jesus did not say, “Just hang on, you poor souls, you will soon be fat and happy in heaven;” he said the Kingdom of heaven is now, and this is what it needs to look like. You, who will follow me, go make the world like this, and you will know that the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

Most of us in this room consider ourselves as supporters of human rights; we may vary a bit in what we define as a human or civil rights issue, but most of us would say that we support the rights of people to have what our prayer book calls “reasonable” lives. Some of us might even use this gospel as an argument to support our politics. It wouldn’t be much of a stretch. The day’s pay the story references is an amount calculated to be about what it takes to live for a day in that culture. That is another way of talking about one’s rights to the basics of life, the bare amount required to have food, clothing and shelter.

If that moves us to be politically active, then so be it. But to understand the full spiritual impact of this story, we have to realize that God’s desire for creation, for the provision of basic needs for all people, is not ultimately about human rights, at least not theologically. God simply loves not because we have the “right” to be loved and cared for but simply because God’s being God means that God loves without regard of worthiness. That truth, once internalized, becomes for us the impetus, yea even the demand, that we spend our lives as followers of Jesus attempting to be Christ in the world—to flatten the playing field, to see that no child of God starves to death, not a single one, to see that the worth and dignity of work be available to all, and on and on.

And, finally, the real reason this passage stirs me—us—is that it exposes my inclination to be miserly and penny-pinching. The workers who toiled all day did not get less because the latecomers got the same amount. All had enough. There is enough for all in creation; our struggle is to learn when enough is enough and when too much is too much.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

©2011 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew’s and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.

325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.