

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: September 24, 2023, Year A, 17th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Title: A Parable about a Parable

Focus: We are prone to score keeping and marking status. The kingdom of God upends our obsessive patterns and invites us to welcome grace for others and ourselves. Baptism is a celebration of that grace by which we are recognized as a part of the family of God.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

¹“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Opening Engager: *The Sneetches* by Dr Seuss

- 1:40 minute YouTube version <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz6n1NclmCE>
- Theme/Point: Dr. Seuss and Star-Bellied Sneetches demonstrate how we can be hung up on status.
- We may think the Sneetches are silly for the value or status they assign to having a star or no star on their belly--until we recognize ourselves in the same story and the value we place on particular things.

Intro: I want to show you another parable. Even if you don’t know this particular story, I’m sure you know the storyteller. **View the video.**

Dr. Seuss wrote delightful children's stories with memorable characters and creative, fanciful images and inventive rhymes. But wouldn't you say that his stories were more than that? His stories functioned like parables—like the stories Jesus told. These are stories which get us to think and see ourselves more clearly.

You listen to the story and you think, "These Sneetches are so silly to place such importance, such value or status, on something as silly as a star on one's belly!" Then, just as soon as that thought comes into your head or as you outwardly express it, you realize we're prone to do the same thing.

We don't invest meaning in having stars on our bellies or not, but we keep score and order things in other ways.

Stars and Status and Seeing Ourselves

That "aha" of self-recognition or the capacity of a story to stick with us as we mull it over, pondering what it means, thinking about how we do the same thing, or reflecting on how we relate to others—that's the quality that makes it function like a parable.

I only showed you a portion of the story (for time's sake). As it continues, an entrepreneur named Sylvester McMonkey McBean appears and offers the Sneetches without stars the chance to get them with his **Star-On machine**, all for the bargain price of three dollars. The treatment is instantly popular, but this upsets the original Star-Bellied Sneetches, as they are in danger of losing their special status.

The clever McBean alerts them that "Belly stars are no longer in style," and offers them the chance to enter his **Star-Off machine**. It costs just ten dollars, and the Sneetches who originally had stars happily pay the money to have them removed so that they can remain special.

Mr. McBean cycles the Sneetches through both machines—Star-On, Star-Off, pocketing their money all the while. . .

"...until neither the Plain nor the Star-Bellies knew
whether this one was that one... or that one was this one...
or which one was what one... or what one was who".

This continues until the Sneetches are penniless and McBean departs as a rich man, amused by their folly.

Dr. Seuss

Theodor Suess Geisel adopted the pen name Dr. Suess while an undergraduate student at Dartmouth. Suess was his middle name and his mother's maiden name. His family was of German descent and he and his sister experienced anti-German prejudice from other children when they were growing up during the first World War. I learned that

he was raised as a Missouri Synod Lutheran and remained a member throughout his life.¹

Jesus and the Landowner and Laborers

Jesus tells this story about a landowner and day laborers hired in his vineyard.

- A landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.
- He agreed to pay them the daily wage and sent them into his vineyard.
- He hired more workers at about nine o'clock
- and about three o'clock
- and about five o'clock
- He told the 5 o'clock workers, "You also go into the vineyard.'
- When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage.
- Now when the first workers came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, **they grumbled against the landowner**, saying, "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.'

You get it, right?!

- They're grumbling because they think that others are getting better than they deserve.
- Even though they agreed to a denarius, the usual daily wage, their expectations had changed when they saw the workers who had been there just one hour getting a full day's wage.

When we hear the story, I bet it's the all-day workers with whom we identify. They feel ripped off. They saw the workers who started at 5 p.m. get a full share and they're expecting to get more, maybe a lot more. But when they show up to be paid, they also get a single denarius. And that doesn't seem fair. I mean, they worked for twelve hours, enduring, as they understandably grumble, the scorch of the sun *all day long*. They deserve more. We get why they're angry. We would be, too.

¹ Dr. Seuss entry in Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr._Seuss

We identify with the all-day-long workers. We share their sense of fairness or unfairness when their expectations for payment have been changed because of what they see others receive.

But there's another perspective, isn't there? The landowner says, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' (Matthew 20:13-15).

The landlord basically tells them that it isn't their business what anyone else received. They haven't been cheated in the slightest. They are simply jealous of the grace shown to others. This grace doesn't fit with their ideas of fairness. They think they deserve more.

Like whether you have a star on your belly or not, in the kingdom of God, the typical divisions of wealth and power don't...really...matter.

Literary Context Helps Establish What this is about

Earlier in Matthew's gospel--in fact immediately before Matthew relays this parable Jesus told, Jesus has three encounters in which he demonstrates that the things on which we place value don't matter in the same way in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus turns things upside down. This narrative context helps convey what Matthew as gospel writer wants us to understand about the story of Jesus.

First: People were bringing little children to Jesus "in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. . . (Matthew 19:13-15).

When the disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them (likely because they figured Jesus shouldn't be bothered by them—as though that would be a waste of time), Jesus declared that it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs—meaning those counted as low status in their culture, as these children were, are first in the kingdom of heaven.

Next, Jesus interacts with a wealthy, though morally earnest, young man who stumbles when Jesus charges him to renounce his wealth to benefit the impoverished (19:16-26). **What Jesus says about the man confounds the disciples**, who are conditioned to see wealth as a sign of God's favor. Jesus says you don't have special status because you are wealthy.

The disciples are looking for special status as well. **Peter asks Jesus about where they stand** as disciples and after Jesus tells this parable, the narrative continues

with the mother of James and John asking for positions of honor for the two of them (Matthew 20:20-21).

- Jesus has just talked about the Kingdom of Heaven belonging to children, who had no status in that culture (Matthew 19:13-15)
- Riches do not matter (Matthew 16-26)
- The disciples do not have preferred status (Matthew 19:27-30)

Jesus is saying that in the kingdom of heaven—the way that God seeks to work in the world--the positions are reversed or things are turned upside down. The things we value—power, wealth, and advantage don't have the same value in God's domain as they do in our world—even for the leading disciples! Jesus says that the positions of first and last will be reversed in God's realm (19:27-30).

Baptism, God's Activity, and Grace

It is fitting that we struggle with this challenging parable on a day on which we celebrate a baptism. While baptism has many meanings, one of the primary affirmations symbolized in the sacrament is that we belong to God, not because of something we do or because something is owed to us—like a wage for workers toiling in a vineyard—but because of the grace of God.

Here's what the ELCA says about baptism:

- “God, whose grace is for all, is the one who acts in Baptism”²

This is striking to me as an affirmation that, first of all and most important of all, it is *God* who acts in baptism. God reaches out to us. Like the landowner, who calls the worker *friend*, God is focused on relationship. That we belong to God in baptism is because of God's action; it is because of what God has done.

- “Baptism is God's gift of overwhelming grace. . .” (p. 24).³

The landowner, when he sees the additional workers are available, he just hires them and pays them what everyone else gets. It's *not* fair; it's *more than* fair. Like the sower who scattered seed widely and broadly (The parable we read this year on July 16—10 weeks ago), this landowner is generous to a confounding degree. You could say this was *not* a wise business practice—it is excessive or extravagant.

² Principle 18, “Baptism is for all ages” in *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament*. ELCA, 1997, p. 24.

file:///Y:/ELCA%20Resources/The_Use_Of_The_Means_Of_Grace%201997.pdf

³ This quote continues: “We baptize infants as if they were adults, addressing them with questions, words, and promises that their parents, sponsors, and congregation are to help them know and believe as they grow in years. We baptize adults as if they were infants, washing them and clothing them with God's love in Christ.”

Do we get what is fair? No, we are gifted by grace and grace by definition isn't about fairness or worthiness. It's about God's loving kindness and generosity. We receive what God has generously given: mercy, grace, forgiveness, salvation.⁴

Thanks be to God for this good news.

⁴ Jill Duffield in a reflection on this text in *Presbyterian Outlook*, 2020.

