

You Have Made Them Equal to Us

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 24, 2017

Matthew 2:1-16

I had a diocesan meeting yesterday in Atlanta. Often at diocesan events, I get the prize for being the person in the room who got up earliest to attend the meeting. But yesterday, even though almost everyone else there was from Atlanta, someone else on the board had me beat. He had gotten up very early to catch a 7 am flight from Baltimore to Atlanta.

He was in Baltimore because his mother had called a family dinner. Every now and then, he explained, she insisted on seeing all of her children at the same time around the same table. When his mother scheduled a dinner, it was understood that all the siblings would do what it took to be there. He said, "In my mother's eyes it is all the same, whether being there means a 12 minute drive across town or a two hour flight from Atlanta. Everyone gets the same credit. Everyone has to be there."

Granted, it took a great deal more effort and expense for him to get to Baltimore from Atlanta than for his sibling to drive twelve minutes. But this man didn't seem to care. In his mind, it is a mother's right to have dinner with all her children at the same time every now and then.

Can you think of parallels in your life? Situations where different amounts of time or effort or money are expected from different people? Maybe one spouse or partner has more energy for housework. Or one parent has the flexibility to take the kids to the dentist. Or one sibling manages most of the care for elderly parents. Or one friend organizes most of the gatherings of a group.

Sometimes, people in those positions feel a little resentful. Like the workers who came early to the field, we expect a greater reward. We get mad when others don't recognize our efforts. We want the slackers to do more of their share. I use we because I often feel this way.

But should we?

So let's think about this from the perspective of the workers who came late in the day. Workers like this are still among us. The day our moving van arrived here in Columbus, the driver of the truck hired three extra guys he found somewhere to help unload it. As soon as they started work, I could tell this wasn't their normal job. They were mostly helpful, but they made a lot of extra trips and didn't seem to know the best ways to lift furniture. They were day laborers, folks

without a secure job looking for daily work. When we were done, the van driver gave them some cash. He told me he always tried to look for folks like this and give them some work.

In Jesus's day there were lots of these folks. They had no land of their own, so they went from farm to farm. The law of the Old Testament had set up a system which should have meant no one would become landless. All debts were supposed to be forgiven every seven years and after seven sevens, or every fifty years, everyone could return to their ancestral home. But though this was God's intention, the system never worked. By Jesus's time, thousands of people had no land, no security, and went out every day hoping for work. If they didn't find it at one town or marketplace, they went to the next. If they started one job in the morning and finished it, they went somewhere else. Like working folks today living in poverty despite having two or three jobs, the workers hired later in the day were not lazy. They told the truth when asked why they were not working. It was not for lack of trying but, "Because no one hired us."

So this landowner hired them. They had no idea what they would be paid – the landowner was vague about that. They worked as long as they could. In their minds, the workers who started first thing in the morning were the lucky ones. They didn't have to move place to place looking for a daily wage. The late workers spent the whole day worried about whether they would survive, so they were overjoyed when the landowner gave them the full amount.

But when the early workers saw the blessing given to the later workers, they gave in to resentment. They turned the good news of the gospel into a complaint - "You have made them equal to us."

Henri Nouwen wrote about this parable in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. We discussed this recently over a few sessions of Pub Theology. We're reading it now with the Rector's study group on the 2nd and 4th Tuesdays at 1. The resentment of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son reminded Nouwen of the resentment of these early workers.

He wrote, "*Each time I read that parable, a feeling of irritation still wells up inside of me. Why didn't the landowner pay those who worked many long hours first and then surprise the latecomers with his generosity? Why, instead, does he pay the workers of the eleventh hour first, raising false expectations in the others and creating unnecessary bitterness and jealousy?*"

It's a good question. The landowner's method was sure to incite human resentment. Why do it this way?

After meditating on this question, Nouwen realized something that is key to the story. He explained, "*It hadn't previously occurred to me that the landowner might have wanted the workers of the early hours to rejoice in his generosity to the latecomers. It never crossed my mind that he might have acted on the supposition that those who had worked in the vineyard the whole day would be deeply grateful . . . to see what a generous man he is.*"

It requires an interior about-face to accept such a non-comparing way of thinking. But that is God's way of thinking. God looks at his people as children of a family who are happy that those who have done only a little bit are as much loved as those who accomplish much. God is so naïve as to think ... that they would all be so happy to be in his presence that comparing themselves with each other wouldn't even occur to them."

Followers of Jesus believe this scandalous idea. "You have made them equal to us." The world tells us some people are better than others. The world tells us some contributions are more important. The world tells us we better get ahead. The world assumes it is okay for some people to have things like food and shelter and clean air and health care and some people not. But it's a lie. Because this world is created and held and sustained by a God who is like my new friend's mother. She wants everyone at the table. She doesn't care that some will come by airplane and some by car. She hopes her children will so happy to be with each other and in her presence they won't even think to make comparisons.

And in similar fashion, I think God doesn't really want us to compare and complain when we think we are doing more work than others, whether it is to care for our families or care for our church or make a difference. Those feelings of resentment may be a sign that we are exceeding our capacity to give and need to back down. But if we are doing something that matters, we give ourselves to it without complaining because we serve a God who gave it all.

We are about to begin our financial pledge season at St. Thomas. A few weeks ago we offered pledges of ministry and service to support the work to which God calls us. Soon we will offer financial pledges for 2018 as the fuel for God's activity among us. Later this year we will also invite you to offer a pledge of invitation – to consider people you know who need this community of worship, learning, and service, and find a way to invite them.

Our financial gifts will all be different. We are able to give in different ways at different stages of lives. I believe we should all work toward a tithe, setting aside just a tenth of what God gives us to invest in God's work. That's been a goal in my own life, but I've only recently been able to make it work, so we start where we can. We give what God enables us to give. We don't compare. We don't assume our gifts are not important because others give what looks like more. We don't complain. We rejoice because everyone has a job to do in the vineyard.

I close with a scene from the movie *All Saints*, the true story of All Saints' Episcopal Church in Smyrna, Tennessee.

Smyrna was a booming town, with lots of new housing and jobs, but the church had dwindled to just a few members. A newly ordained priest was sent there to close it. Soon after arriving, a group of Karen refugees from Burma showed up. They were Anglicans, so they joined the church. All Saints had many acres of land that weren't being used. The Karen members needed food, and the church needed money, so they planted a farm, planning to feed the Karen and sell the rest to raise money to pay the mortgage and save the church.

As it happened, there was a drought that summer. They struggled to water the fields and barely kept the plants alive. Then when it was time to harvest, all of a sudden torrential rains came. Every member of the church worked desperately to get the crops in. Volunteers from the community showed up to help, flashlights in hand. The priest gave everyone who showed up a job to do. Every hand was needed because the work was so important.

God has made us all equal. God needs everyone. And God will not rest until the entire harvest is gathered in.