

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16

word count: 2,032

It is “Back to Church Sunday.” We have a video on the web-site about it, and it confirms that we are not alone in choosing this Sunday as the one to say, “Yes, it has been a great summer, but now let’s get back to it.” Church, are we ready?

When I was planning my own time away recently, I heard about a show that has been playing all summer in Québec City. There are no tickets—just show up. There is no actual starting time—when it gets dark is about right. There are no directions, nor is there a theatre. It is performed under a highway overpass and it takes place on neglected ground that looks as if it is used to store city construction vehicles and equipment. For three years, Cirque du Soleil has been creating these shows as a gift to Québec.

I wanted to go. When I was there this summer, I asked someone at the hotel how to find it. She had been three times, and so she took my map of the city and drew a very complicated path that wound through two neighborhoods.

It was daunting. And, the confidence I had in being alone on the streets with my language skills had been undermined a couple of hours earlier when I was checking in. In French, I told the lovely young woman at the counter my name; that I had a room reservation, and here was my AAA card. She asked me if I was alone, and in my only perfect French, I told her she was lonely. I became confused between both the first and second person, and the words for “alone” and “lonely.” It was quite a look she gave me, but she was most kind. The rest of the conversation continued under the consensual conceit that I was actually speaking *very* well.

I started walking down a steep hill, and within a short time, I saw more and more people streaming in one direction with confidence. I put away the map and followed. The locals-only shortcut took us off the street and down long, utilitarian staircases. Hundreds of people walked through the yard of what had once been a proud, stone house before the highway ramps took away this small vale in the city. It now housed a maintenance facility and we walked past the equipment that was stored all around us. Down further, there were tall, corrugated metal gates. At the sound of a horn, the gates rolled back and the masses of people crowded onto the field and the show began.

The emcee, a man wearing an impossible number of hats piled one upon another, came out to greet us. The king was introduced, and he strode out in a tall unevenly pointed crown and a long robe. He commanded the show and the performers in it. And in the way only Cirque Du Soleil can achieve, high wire walkers crossed over while acrobats on wires walked straight up the braces under the overpass and dove off into unseen trampolines, only to rise up to the top and do it again and again. Musicians wearing kilts and red-plumed Roman helmets flew on wires while playing their guitars. Songs were sung and the different acts performed as special effects strobed all around in vivid colors and striking images. The king shouted, “It is a spectacle” in French understatement, if there is such a thing, and it was grand. All the while, people kept streaming in. As the music built, the king ordered all the performers to move to the right and then to the left, this way and that. He turned to the audience to do the same and soon it was a rave—the mass moved to the music in whichever direction he pointed, pumping the air with their arms whenever he did it. These became choreographed movements, and it went on until the people were shouting. I had a borrowed child on my shoulders, and we made the motions together with mom and her friend next to us.

The emcee told the crowds to take photos and videos and post them for free to anyone—this does not cost—it is there for everyone to share. Spread the word, joy is on the house, it is gratis, completely complimentary!

The music swelled, as did the field of strangers when even more streamed in and took their cue to join in the dance, commanded by the royal figure in the red robe and spiked crown. The show is called, “Les Chemins Invisibles,” the invisible paths—and the people were invited to move along them in one connected body. It was, for me, a moment when spectacle became spiritual and the unreal was real. The energy lasted until we knew it was time for it to end, and so it did; in a final resolved chord.

After the applause, the people turned and walked back from the many directions from which they came in order to find this place, and we labored up many old stairs back to the world above, where each found his or her own familiar, singular rhythm again and moved off alone or in small groups to many destinations.

There is something in this experience that causes me to see a parallel to today’s lesson, if only in remembering the sheer ecstasy that was in that field when such a shared sense of equity brought everyone into one place. No-one had a better ticket than anyone else. It was open ended in many ways, and those who came later had no less an experience than those of us who waited for the gates to open. It was something ephemeral, but while it was occurring, the more that came later into the evening, the more joy there was in the place to share. We were enriched as the circle became wider. This is what we could be together—here is what we could share if we really understood our interconnectedness.

Jesus’ parables invite us to think—they are open-ended and call for discussion. In the case of the laborers in the vineyard, the parable provokes a discussion of fairness. Depending on where we are in our lives and what experience of bounty or lack thereof we are participating in, we might also see the parable through a different lens than we had before.

For a church entering into a new season together, the story may point to the extreme generosity of spirit many of us find here, myself included, that mirrors what this parable says about the realm of God. As we move to Mason Park today for a picnic, (and our guests are invited) we see that some have been here for many years and have formed deep and lasting friendships. Others bring a fresh eye and perspective to their new community, while seeking a place in which to nurture and be nurtured—through the various ministries and small groups that the church offers. All are welcome, whether you have been here many years, a short while, or just walked through our doors today.

An important mission of the church is to work for what we understand to be true about that which we name, “the realm of God.” Today’s parable even begins with the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like...” and then talks of a place where the last will be first, and the first last.

Family Promise, Mission 1, and beginning a conversation about being more active in global mission—all of these bring light to issues of the disparities that separate us one from another and the balm that we can provide in our own way as a church community.

Thank you, Susan Allen and Cheryl Arguile for stepping up to help our church begin to assist with families that have fallen into homelessness and help to bring them back into stability through our work with Family Promise. This is an important action we are taking in our own community.

Today’s passage is about grace at work, and that grace has a way of transforming those it touches.

Paul Nancarrow, writing in *Process Theology and Faith* says, “In this parable, the fact that the laborers all receive the same wage is not a useful piece of information or a wise precept for living; it is a patent absurdity that is intended to goad our offended sense of fairness to jump to a new way of seeing the situation. In interpreting parables it is good to begin with the end: here the “punch line” is “So the last will be first, and the first will be last,” and the whole vineyard narrative can be taken as an elaborate wind-up for that pitch.

But, in his book *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes*, Justo Gonzales notes that this parable elicits surprisingly different reactions when read to typical, middle-class audiences in America compared to poor Hispanic audiences.

Most people are perplexed that someone who had worked for only an hour should be paid the same as someone who has worked for eight hours. It seems patently unfair. Moreover, most people don't understand the fuss. The logic is so clear, typical Americans cannot understand on what grounds one could argue the fairness of Jesus' approach.

When the story is read or studied by a Hispanic congregation, however, the reaction is quite different. These are people, Gonzales says, who identify with the problems of the field workers. They understand the laborer who travels in his pickup truck trying to find work with little success, or, even if he finds work, he is standing around waiting for the job to materialize.

Gonzalez says that at the end of the parable when the landowner pays the wages, the Hispanic congregation applauds when the laborers who worked for only one hour get paid a full day's pay. They are not confused by this, but understand that the people looking for work, and who have been waiting for work, need a day's pay to survive. They rejoice, then, at the grace that is not contrary to justice, but that flows with justice. They are paid what they need to live rather than the wages they might have been paid had society's concept of justice prevailed.¹

Those who worked the longest must watch everyone else get paid the same as they do. Their complaint does not simply concern money; it goes much deeper, to what the money represents. It takes us beneath mere economics to the spirit that underlies so much economic competition—a spirit shaped by the metaphors of winners and losers, superior and inferior, those who deserve and those who do not. This parable calls us to envision the new order that has been presented in the gospels and help create the possibility of something new and better for us all.²

The church is called to be the place where the people believe in faith that all aims are for the greatest love, justice, and peace possible in any situation, and where we strive to harmonize our actions and experiences into greater mutual well-being, and this helps to build up what Jesus refers to as the kingdom of heaven on earth.

It reminds me a little of a spectacle I attended under an overpass. It is a place where all are welcome—no tickets or better seats—and those who arrive later only increase the joy of those already here. You don't need directions—your heart tells you if you are in the right place. The joy is on the house, it is gratis, completely complimentary!

Welcome back to another church year and season. Come to the party and stay with us this year to help us write a new chapter about direct action and new friendships; of looking ahead to our future; of programs for kids and youth, and outreach to those who need the gifts you bring in your concern and caring; of meaningful worship and how we reflect our reverence for Creation back to the world following in the example of Jesus. Let's walk the walk together. I hope to see you at Mason Park.

Amen.

Sermon Resources

Les Chemins Invisibles—ending clip <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&v=NHx71ftwbTY>
overview <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfKzRP9D6Xg&feature=related>

1) Justo Gonzales, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* ([Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996] 62-63)

2) Charles L. Campbell, *Now What is God Calling Us to Do*, from, "Homiletical Perspective"

Scripture for Sunday, September 18, 2011

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