

Sermon, September 20, 2026
"Accepting Generosity"
Second Sunday of Creation Season, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Every afternoon two monks strolled in the garden of their monastery. One day as they were walking along a wooded path, one of the monks asked the other if he thought it would be a pleasant experience to have a cigarette as they continued on. The other agreed, but they decided they should ask the abbot for his permission. The next day as they came out for their walk, one of the monks was smoking a cigarette and the other was not. "We agreed to ask the abbot," said the monk who was not smoking. "That is so, and I did," replied the other.

"I asked for permission to smoke and was refused."

"How did you ask?"

"I approached the master and said, 'When I am walking and meditating in the garden is it all right if I smoke a cigarette?' and he said, 'Absolutely not!'"

The monk smoking a cigarette replied: "You see, my brother, it is in the asking of the question that you were bound to be denied. I approached the master and said, 'Master, when I am smoking in the garden, is it all right if I meditate?' and he said, 'Certainly.'"

The best stories tend to turn our expectations upside down – sometimes answering questions we didn't even know enough to ask. Jesus' most intriguing parables – like many traditional tales that have spoken to generations on questions of wisdom and inner truth – often make us do a "doubletake," and thereafter tend to stick in our minds and hearts.

Today's gospel is a "doubletake" parable. What was your reaction, "Not Fair!?" The reaction of those who worked the longest, who got paid the same as everyone? Grumbling – I'm sure in those grumbles there were a few, "That's not Fair". And fairness is a strong value many of us learn from our first experiences in childhood from who gets the most cookies to the best birthday presents. And it gets projected into adulthood with concepts of equal pay, fair wages, minimum wage, union wage – all good things but . . . but Jesus saw a higher value at play, made them ponder, think more deeply – and yes challenged their ideas about fairness. Today's parable of workers in a vineyard has to do with expectations and outcomes, issues that are closely connected with how we ask and assumptions about what we are "entitled to."

Before we get to what Jesus was after let's go back to the care of creation and the climate crisis. Yes you say we may have a problem but there are other values at play here also. The economy, and jobs, and my own comfort and convenience may also get in the way of doing everything we can. And as I said last week, we can also say "I'm not responsible for this problem; I'm not a big polluter". So how do we approach this dilemma? I took one approach last week and I bludgeoned you over the head with a lot of true but gloomy statistics about the effects of climate change (animal extinction, rising oceans, the effects on our food supply). Why some of you left here bloody and bruised! And how did you react?

- Put your hands over your ears and not believe it?
- Believe some of it put your hands over your eyes and say, well it's really not that bad.
- Believe it but sit on your hands and say "What can I do I'm only one little person!"

So today in the second creation lesson we heard a different approach to solve big seemingly intractable problems. It was called a "Slower Urgency" by Nigerian scholar, Bayo Akomolafe. He presents the counter-intuitive idea that

Sometimes, what is the appropriate thing to do is not the effective thing to do. Slowing down is thus about lingering in the places we are not used to. Seeking out new questions. Becoming accountable to more than what rests on the surface. Seeking roots.

While presenting all the scientific data regarding the climate crisis has worked to convert some, it hasn't converted enough people, corporations or governments to make changes necessary to reduce our carbon emissions at a sufficient rate. Maybe another approach is to slow down and seek roots. And what would those roots be? To fall in love with creation, whether for the first time or the umpteenth time, and not creation in the abstract but the creation in our backyards – the creatures, plants, trees, ponds and mountains of Franklin County. As Wendell Berry said in that first reading, "We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence." And once we discover it, we need to share it with others, talk about our love of nature, encourage children in particular to spend more time in it. And we do that by slowing down.

And it is only in slowing down that this very weird parable of Jesus might make sense. Because what is the message, what is the value? Jesus, in telling the story, is after larger truths, and he stretches out the tale to an exasperating length – with, seemingly, no justice in sight. Yet logic must admit that the owner does no wrong by keeping his own word, and by being overly generous to some who may not seem to deserve it. As Mark Twain said, “Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture which they do not understand, but the passages that bother me are those I do understand.” Could we possibly be hearing that we should rejoice in what others receive regardless of what we may think is *our* due? And as someone else put it, God is more interested in making us what we ought to be than in giving us what we think we ought to have.

The theologian Karl Rahner compares the wage each worker received as the true gift of ourselves and the gift of creation. This we must accept, not just without grumbling but with a good will, because it is given to us by the God who asks: ‘Do you begrudge my generosity?’ “This, then, is our great life’s work: to accept ourselves as the mysterious and gradually revealed gift of the eternal generosity of God. For everything that we have, even the painful and mysterious, is God’s generous gift; all of us, young and old alike, are really the latecomers to the vineyard. And yet God is willing to give us everything if we will only accept it – ourselves, God’s very self and life without end.”

Why do we have such difficulty accepting God’s generosity and naming it for what it truly is? Sometimes linear thinking – who should get what or what’s fair – just won’t get us “there.” The curved lines of stories and parables show us ourselves in perhaps not such a good light – but ultimately one that shines itself on our condition and awakens us to the love that stands behind this immeasurable gift.