

Grace

Proper 20, year A, RCL. Matthew 20:1-16. The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. September 18, 2011. The Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

A vacation should refresh a person's perspective with new thoughts. This happened to me several times in the past four days, a short vacation but one rich in experience. Let me tell you about one of those experiences. Two days ago Julie, her father and I were walking among the ruins of Erie Beach, an amusement park in Canada near Niagara Falls that has been closed for eighty years. Never heard of it? Not surprising; its more famous rival Crystal Beach lasted till 1989. I rode the rides at Crystal Beach myself, as did Julie and her dad.

But Erie Beach is now in part a park, and you could say it's *eerie* indeed to walk among the young trees, on sidewalks once broadly paved and neatly bordered but now crumbling, leaf-strewn pathways, occasionally encountering a huge oak, past its days of full magnificence, surrounded by a decaying circular stone wall that once marked it as a specimen. The surging crowds of 1920s summers are gone. The once famous swimming areas are overgrown strips of sand. Huge concrete blocks and almost vanished walls lie among vegetation and along the lake shore, home now to chipmunks and the other creatures that inherit the wrecks of human enterprise when we let time have its natural way with the works of our hands.

And yet...I didn't find Erie Beach *eerie* or even sad. I found it sober. I found it eloquent. I found it friendly. And when I read today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, Erie Beach said this to me: I am your example of what you get when you build anything less than the Kingdom of God.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew is about grace. I've had a fair amount to say about that topic lately, with one slant or another, since recent Gospel readings have a lot to do with it. Today's reading is about the way God, not nature—not what seems natural to us—deals with human beings in the world of time, space and matter.

Jesus tells a parable that compares God to a vineyard owner who goes around to the place where general laborers hang out and agrees to hire one group after another throughout the day for the same wage—a denarius, which (you should all remember by now) was the standard daily wage in ancient times for general labor. The last bunch hired—the truly undesirables, one suspects—only works one hour but each person in it gets the whole denarius. Which, of course, outrages those who worked longer for the same wage.

We know the vineyard owner is God because nobody else acts like this. Human vineyard owners, that is, human business managers, operate by the law of *proportionality*: for more work, or, more precisely, for more value added by you to the business, you get more pay. But I've been reminding us that God's grace is free, abundant, and does not depend on human merit or worthiness, and I keep reminding us of this because the readings keep reminding us, and they keep doing that because the Gospel according to Matthew keeps doing it, and Matthew keeps doing it because Jesus kept doing it. So it must be mighty important.

It is indeed one of the most important things I know about, because it has to do with the main difference between the way God looks at what's important in life, the universe and everything and how human beings typically look at it. We look at what we can get out of it, what we can acquire; God looks at what he can put into it, what he can give away. That whole giving-away deal is what we mean by grace. We tend to think God is useful and makes good

sense as long as he acts like a good boss who will give fair return for service rendered. But, as N. T. Wright puts it,

“God’s grace...is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. It isn’t the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. The point of the story is that what people get from having served God and his kingdom is not, actually, a ‘wage’ at all. It’s not, strictly, a reward for work done. God doesn’t make contracts with us, as if we could bargain or negotiate for a better deal. He makes covenants, in which he promises us everything and asks of us everything in return. When he keeps his promises, he is not rewarding us for effort, but doing what comes naturally to his overflowingly generous nature.”¹

So strongly is our sense of basic fairness connected with the notion of proportional response that this notion of God’s grace, fundamental to Christian faith and practice as it is, tends to strike people as just plain wrong. If you do more *for* God, you should get more *from* God—more status, more influence (read: power), more rewards both in this life and in the afterlife.

But as I suggested in last Sunday’s sermon, the only proportion involved in our relationship with God is this: the more we forgive others, the more God can transform our hearts to be like the heart of his Son. As Saint Francis of Assisi said, it is in giving that we receive. But what we receive is not status, money and power but hearts of trust, peace, joy and wisdom. Or if you prefer, hearts of confidence, balance, delight and true understanding. Hearts that create goodness, hearts that pour God’s power out with every beat. Our job in God is not to earn rewards but to radiate light and life.

Yes, we get something out of it. But what we get is renewal and transformation, an alteration in our nature, not any sort of

¹ N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two*, page 57.

possession at all. It changes how possessions look and feel and what we do with them.

Sin, on the other hand, does pay a wage. That wage, said Saint Paul, is death (Romans 6:23). This is because possessions—I mean mental, social and material possessions—are at the mercy of time, space and matter infected with evil. Until God's grace completely renews all things, possessions are subject to processes of change that corrupt value. The magnificent amusement park passes away; it is transformed from glory into decay. In the Kingdom of Heaven it doesn't work like that; God's abundant, resplendently generous grace is the rule. Time, renewed in Christ, will not corrupt. Life will lead to more life.

Meanwhile...in the meantime...as things presently stand...

The call to us, followers of Jesus Christ, is not to look for wages, rewards, and inducements to service. Our call in God is not to *seek wages* but to *wage his Kingdom*. We are the people who trust God for life over death, righteousness over sin, hope over despair, love over hatred (or indifference), heaven over hell, renewal over the same-old, same-old, and refreshment over starvation. Of that holy trust between us and God we will have more to say, more to learn, more to share in the Wednesday night adult spiritual formation group at Trinity, beginning this week.

But don't wait till Wednesday. Drink right now, today and every day, from the inexhaustible wellspring of grace, receiving it thankfully, and being glad it is offered equally to everyone.