

Sermon for September 20, 2020 - 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16
St. Clement's Anglican Church

We all have childhood memories that have stayed with us; snippets of moments that remain clear in our minds even though most of the surrounding details are long forgotten. I remember a day when I was seven, for example, when my grandpa brought a puppy to our house and I got to keep it. I remember looking out the window from our basement and seeing a costumed Santa Claus walking across our front lawn, and feeling the tingle up my back.

And I definitely remember one morning in Sunday school, hearing today's gospel passage about the landowner and the workers and thinking "Well THAT'S not fair!" For a span of some years, I remained highly indignant on behalf of those vineyard labourers who had started their work at the crack of dawn only to go home with the same amount of money in their pocket as those who had rolled up just before quitting time.

Eventually it was explained to me that we were to see this story as a metaphor for God's inclusive love – that those who turn to God even near the end of their life are as welcome in the kingdom as those who have been faithful throughout their earthly journey. I found this a much more acceptable explanation – as long as the dimes and quarters that Mom paid out for household chores continued to be distributed by means of a consistently equitable, merit-based, predictable system, I was quite willing for God's love to be distributed willy-nilly.

But in reading this passage with older eyes, and especially in these times, it is the absolutely literal, non-metaphorical meaning of this story that is filling my heart. For what could be more wonderful than each and every worker in the world, regardless of their personal circumstances, going home at the end of the day with *enough*. Enough for food, for shelter, for clothing, for a few small comforts. Boy, I would be happy to work a couple of extra hours in the morning if it meant that everyone else could go to bed each night with enough. Now, I guess you might say that by means of our income taxes we do in fact offer up our labour to support others, and this is true, but we can see from looking at the hungry and unhoused in our community that it is not true enough.

Today's parable challenges me to see through God's eyes; to see the world through the lens of *enough*. Over the past week or two, I was spending so much time thinking about that word, *enough*, that I finally looked up its origin. It is very old, dating from about 1300, and apparently it is one of the only surviving words built using the Old English prefix spelled *g-e*, meaning *with* or *together*. The root of the word is from a far more ancient proto European language and means to *reach*, or *attain*. So it seems to me reasonable that this word, *enough*, developed out of the assumption that sufficiency is not attained individually, but communally. Together. We hear this philosophy echoed in today's psalm, that says God "brought Israel out with silver and gold, and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled."

The scriptures continually caution those of us with *enough* to avoid the sin of *too much*. In today's Exodus reading, God provides the Israelites with manna to eat – but in the verses that follow this text, we will learn that those who gathered less had sufficient, while those who gathered more than the necessary allotment and attempted to hoard it were faced with manna that had turned stinking and rotten.

And in the Lord's Prayer, we are taught to pray for our daily bread. Not for overloaded freezers filled with food bought months earlier, for bags of bread and buns that have gone white and furry with freezer burn, but for our *daily* bread. And I would suggest that in this prayer, "our" daily bread refers to feeding all the world's people, not just the people around our own supper table.

This pandemic has helped us learn a little more about what *enough* feels like in our often over-stuffed lives. Do we need to dash out to the store for a few extra ingredients, or do we have enough? What kinds of meetings and meet-ups can we forgo, and still get our work done? Even if we can't cook for our friends and provide the kind of hospitality we are used to, is simply sitting together in the sunshine and listening to each other over a cup of store-bought coffee enough? In a world of relentless entertainment and distraction, can we find enough to do, and read, and learn, and craft and build, without leaving home or purchasing more stuff online?

And we are learning yet again the places where there is not enough. We know that homes are not safe places for all. That most people don't have adequate savings to shield them through such times as these. That, as is so often the case, societal disruption usually makes the rich richer, the poor poorer, and the sick sicker. Amazon, for instance, doubled its net profit over the first half of this year; this has indeed been a very good pandemic for some.

These challenging times have also given us a glimpse of what it might be like to find enough for all. We saw homeless people moved to unused hotel rooms, and those on social benefits given a few hundred extra bucks a month. We saw renters protected from eviction and small business owners given a hand to keep them from insolvency. Amidst the shut-downs and anxiety, these were the headlines that gave hope to many. Now there are groups and individuals urging our governments to plan for a new normal in the wake of the pandemic; to use this time to recalibrate our society; to resolve to take concrete measures to create healthier and greener cities, productive, sustainable economies and appropriate social safety nets. The Anglican Church of Canada is one of hundreds of organizations that have signed on to endorse this concept and I encourage you to read more about its aims at the website *justrecoveryforall.ca*.

But how can we afford all this? you might ask. Well, I am not an economist. But it's not my job to be, and it's probably not yours. As citizens, it is our job to be engaged in the world around us, to make our views known and to contribute what gifts we have. And as Christians, it is our job to do all this while remembering our commitment to love one another and to protect the most vulnerable in our society. If we put our mind to it, we *can* decide we don't want to live in a world in which a few thousand individuals hold more wealth than billions of other people combined. If enough people really want to live in a society in which everyone has enough, and if we speak, and vote, and pray, and teach to that end, the economists and decision makers will eventually catch up.

I know from experience that this is much easier to preach than to practice. Not just because we humans seem programmed to reach beyond our *needs* and indulge endlessly in *wants*, but because billions of advertising dollars convince us that happiness can be bought and that we are more valuable as consumers than as citizens. But Jesus teaches us that the gift of abundance is not a state in which *my* cup overflows, but one in which *everyone's* cup has enough.

I recently caught a vision of this abundance during a conversation with my uncle, an 80-year-old free spirit who has chosen to spend most of his adult years on the subsistence line, living a very rich life but barely eking out a living. Instead he has spent most of his working hours volunteering with food ministries, community gatherings, and organic farms. We had a visit in my carport on his last drive through town, en route from a farm in Cache Creek to his home base in Victoria. His first task on returning home was going to be to re-establish the food runs he had been making for some time, in which once or twice a week he fills his van with food donated by the Salvation Army and drives it to First Nations schools in the Saanich peninsula.

My uncle loves pulling up to the schools, flinging wide the back doors of the truck and inviting the kids to take what they want. He got uncharacteristically teary when he described the sight of kids with their hands laden with fruit, one young boy skipping down the hallway as he ate from a bunch of grapes he was dangling above his head. I could see how moved he was by the experience and it filled my heart as well. *This* is what Christ's *enough* looks like. This is what abundance feels like. And I realized that shared abundance can spark tears of joy in a way that an individual's over-abundance simply cannot.

I well understand those who, on first reading, see the parable of the vineyard owner and the workers as vastly unfair, just as I had. But the years are teaching me to see it through a different lens. May we as a church pray for the courage and clarity to speak up for a world that wants everyone to go home with enough. Amen.

- *The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen*