

16th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 20, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger
on September 20, 2026

Exodus 16:2-15 / Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 / Philippians 1:21-30 / Matthew 20:1-16

*We will exalt You, O God, and bless Your Name for ever and ever.
Every day will we bless You and praise Your Name for ever and ever.*

I know 2 priests who utilize the Prolon 5-Day fasting kits. One uses the kit when he is feeling fat. The other is trying the kit for the first time to aid in her spiritual discipline of fasting. It's minimalist nutrition at the level to just keep your body in a fasting state, but just for 5 days.

According to the Prolon website:

The Prolon 5-Day FMD kit contains five small boxes, each labeled for one of the five days of the program. Each day's box contains all the food, beverages, and supplements you'll consume for that specific day. [It] provides nourishment while keeping the body in a fasting state.

Like the manna from heaven, Prolon gives you only what you need for the day to keep from dying. The manna appeared in the morning, and each person could only take what they needed. It had a greed clause attached to it. Here's what comes next in the Exodus story:

This is what the Lord has commanded: "Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person." They gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, 'Let no one leave any of it over until morning.' But they did not listen; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul.

God said to take only what was enough for a day. It could not be stored up. I'm sure all of us have full pantries, full refrigerators and full freezers. Imagine if you received only what you needed for each day? If you had only what you *needed* in

your house, would you trust God that you would be OK? Or would you only trust God when you had reserves?

The Gospel has an element of what one needs for the day, also. The usual daily wage – a denarius – bought the bread you needed for one day for one person. Not for a spouse, not for children; just enough for one person. So the landowner with his generosity ensured that all of the laborers, regardless of how long they worked, had what they needed for the day. The laborers who only worked an hour or so were given just enough to survive the day.

That is what the Kingdom of Heaven is like: not only is it generous, but it makes sure that each person has what s/he needs for the day. As God's hands and feet in this world ... how do we make that happen?

At some point in human history, we ended up with a society, a global culture, in which there are those who are entitled to what they get, those who deserve what they get and those who are undeserving of their basic human needs. I don't know how we got there, but we did, and it was clearly evident in Jesus' time by the theme of His parable.

The typical interpretation of this parable is that God is the landowner, the laborers are us, and the pay is God's grace, or maybe even salvation. The point of the parable is that God's grace is not a competition – unlike one's food for the day, it is not a commodity. And we must remember that when we encounter all sorts of people in our daily lives: *Everyone is deserving of the opportunity to receive God's grace*. It's not up to us. Our opinion of a person doesn't matter; our judgment is null-and-void. The landowner – God – said to the complainers:

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?

God decides who receives God's grace. But, we live in the earthly realm where people tend to get in the way of God's plans. There are the *deserving* and then there are the *undeserving*.

Remember the Welfare Queen? She was formed out of a true story of a criminal master mind to justify massive cuts to the Mothers' Pensions which became Aid to Families with Dependent Children, better known as "welfare." It very quickly became an issue of the *deserving* and *undeserving*. This is from a PBS documentary:

Women who needed any of these social services were especially demonized, not only as lazy, but as sexually promiscuous, single mothers who would rather have more children than find work. And the term welfare has been racialized over the years, as well ... There was little sympathy for the poor, especially immigrants. But mothers, particularly white, Christian mothers, were seen as "worthy" and deserving of compassion and support ... A mother must be deemed "of good character" and "fit to raise children." This language was used to disqualify any women of color, any family of non-Christian faith, or women who didn't speak English. It could also be used to disqualify anyone else the local authority determined as unfit to receive the money.¹

But the abuse of the system by the *undeserving* has never been true. The statistics don't bear it out. The Welfare Queen was created by a presidential campaign from a true story. Linda Taylor from Chicago had committed many crimes, including about \$40,000 in welfare benefits – which was inflated to \$150,000 on the campaign trail. But what was left out on the campaign trail was that she also committed kidnapping, burglary, and insurance fraud. But the nation listened to the campaign story, and ever since, the poor have always been undeserving. Yet, in 2025, there were fewer than 1,000 benefits fraud cases for a total of \$139M². Compare that to the \$4.49B in tax fraud³ that same year.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/from-mothers-pensions-to-welfare-queens-debunking-myths-about-welfare/>

² <https://www.ussc.gov/research/quick-facts/government-benefits-fraud>

³ <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p3583.pdf>

Both stories from Exodus and Matthew have overtones of the *deserving* and the *undeserving*. Our faith tells us that it is not our place to judge. Imagine if we stopped caring about how other people live their lives! And just made sure we all had a living wage and enough food for today. And let God take care of the rest. I'm not trying to make you into that bad "S" word. I'm simply suggesting that, as Christians, we see everyone as *deserving* – of their basic daily needs and of God's grace.

How can we as Christians, informed by scripture, do away with categorizing people as *deserving* or *undeserving*, especially of the food they need for each day? How can we design a world where everyone has enough? As God's hands and feet in this world, living our Baptismal Covenant – that we all renewed last week with the Bishop – will take us a huge step further in ensuring that every person has what they need for the day.

Some of the work we do at St Stephen's accomplishes this.

- We prepare lunch for 40 Prado once a month.
- There are several 12-step groups who meet in our rooms. You may not think that is a generous act, but there are churches who do not think those with addictions – even if in recovery – are *deserving*.
- We just gave the CAPSLO Downtown Engagement Team 10 tents, 24 backpacks, 45 pairs of socks, 75 pairs of men's underwear and 100 pairs of women's underwear.
- And some of you brought in some gently used men's clothing.

I wish I would have collaborated with Jack from 40 Prado on this sermon. His entire career has been in homeless services. He knows the root causes of homelessness, which are *not* drug and alcohol abuse. The number one cause of homelessness is not enough housing stock. But he also works daily with the attitudes of the *deserving* and *undeserving*, which is a constant battle in doing the work that he and the CAPSLO Team here on our property do. And as the

unhoused from the Bob Jones trail begin moving into the Welcome Home Village, I am hearing lots of comments regarding the undeserving.

While I'm up here, I will also mention that the vineyard of St Stephen's needs tending to, as well. The Annual Giving Campaign is about to kick off, and I would be remiss if I didn't mention that the laborers need our daily wage, and our ministries come with a daily cost.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.

The Kingdom of Heaven is not *just* the landowner, it's not *just* the vineyard, and it's not *just* the laborers. The Kingdom of Heaven is all of that put together. At the end of the story, the landowner questions those who complain. He asserts that he is allowed to do what he chooses with what belongs to him, and he has chosen to be generous. One can assume that the workers, too, were generous in their labor, regardless of how many hours they worked. The story as a whole is a story of generosity. It suggests that we should give of our time, talent, treasure and *our faith* from an attitude of abundance, not one of scarcity. In the Kingdom of Heaven, God is generous – God's love is abundant. As we look toward what to do with our own money and the money of St Stephen's, let us also be generous so that we can welcome in the laborer, new members of St Stephen's, whatever time of day they arrive.

Together, let's work at eliminating the idea that there are the *deserving* and the *undeserving*. It would make for a healthier community and a healthier society. Can we trust that God will give us what we need for the day while we work on making sure everyone else has what they need for the day? As we do that, I'm certain that it will give deeper meaning as we pray

*Give us today our daily bread,
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*