

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20A)

September 21, 2008

Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Philippians 1:21-30

Psalms 145:1-8

Matthew 20:1-16

Does God Play by the Rules?

Years ago, when my son Sam was twelve, after he had finished his homework we would sometimes sit down together and play a board game or a game of cards. Our favorite was a rather wild and disconcerting card game called “Fluxx.” It’s the sort of game you learn to play not by reading the rules but by plunging in. It starts with each person being dealt three cards. Then you draw a card and play a card. Simple. The trouble is, the game never stands still. The rules change with every hand. Depending on which cards are played, sometimes you end up holding a whole fistful of cards and sometimes you have to give them all away. Sometimes you must show your cards and sometimes you can hide them. Even the *goal* of the game keeps changing. Just when you’ve figured out how you’re going to win and are about to trounce your opponent, the goal changes and the game goes off in an entirely new direction. Or just when you think you’ve had it and you’re going to lose, the goal abruptly switches and all of a sudden you’ve won. Sam and I would laugh a lot as we played, but I have to say, the game made me dizzy.

Right now most of us are not just playing a card game called “Fluxx” – we’re *living* it. The collapse of Lehman Brothers, the sale of Merrill Lynch, the bailout of A.I.G. and the proposed bailout of the whole system of mortgage financing -- well, our country’s entire economic system suddenly looks alarmingly fragile. There is talk that we may be facing the worst financial crisis in the U.S. since the Great Depression. While experts scramble to work out a solution, ordinary Americans worry about the security of their jobs and pensions, about how to cover the cost of college tuition or pay back college loans, how to meet mortgage payments and pay their fuel bills.

Many of us feel may feel rattled and anxious this morning as we consider our nation’s economy and our own family’s financial security. The rollercoaster of economic news this week is a stark reminder that life is like that: a perpetual state of flux, though some periods -- like this past week, for example -- are more unstable than others.

Today's Collect goes straight to the heart of the matter, for we need God's help "not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure." I want you to know that I did not choose today's Collect -- it is the Collect that was assigned for this Sunday, and it's just what we need to hear.

In a world of impermanence and constant change, what *does* endure? To what *can* we hold fast? Like the first group of workers in Matthew's parable about the laborers in the vineyard, in a time of uncertainty we want life to be orderly and predictable. We want clarity. We want God to play by the rules.

"Tell me what to expect and then deliver the goods. Hire me for a day's work and give me a day's pay."

The landowner says, "Fine."

A few hours pass, the landowner needs more help in the vineyard, and at 9 o'clock when he sees other people "standing idle in the marketplace," he offers them work and promises to pay "whatever is right" (Mt 20:3, 4). He does the same thing at noon, at 3 o'clock and 5 o'clock.

So far, so good! But in a move that would astonish both a proponent of free-market capitalism and an advocate of governmental regulation, at the end of the day the employer not only pays the last group first, he gives a full day's pay to everyone, regardless of whether they've worked all day or only one hour.

The workers who were hired early in the morning begin to grumble.

"Hey, that's not fair!" they say. "You're not playing by the rules! Those latecomers worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us, who sweat it out all day!"

The generous landowner explains that no one has been cheated. No one has received less than the agreed amount. What the first group of workers finds offensive is not that they have been treated badly but that other people are getting more than they deserve. It's the same irritation that Jonah felt when God forgave the people of Ninevah: forgiveness and generosity aren't fair!

And that's the point of the parable: God's rules are not our rules. We may think that God will reward us according to how tirelessly we work, or how long we've been at it, or how much we do for God. But in a sense none of that matters to God. God loves us whether we deserve it or not. Even if we don't give God a second thought until we're on our deathbed and at last admit that we've squandered our lives on selfish things, and, like the Prodigal Son, we finally turn in anguish to God to say, "I'm so sorry -- please forgive me!" -- even then, at the eleventh hour, God gives the latecomer the full measure of God's love, with nothing held back. As one commentator puts it, "The generosity of God...cuts

across our calculations of who deserves what.”¹ In short – God plays by God’s rules.

This morning I am glad to hear the parable of the laborers in the vineyard not because it can tell us how to fix the economy. The Bible is obviously not a manual of political economics. But what we do find in the Bible, and in this Gospel story, is news of God’s economy, news of the kingdom of God, lessons of how to live in the midst of the world’s uncertainty and impermanence and fragility, while holding fast to the things that shall endure.

What endures? The love of God endures -- the absurd, abundant, over-the-top, generous love that God offers to everyone. In the kingdom of God, there is no need to hoard or grab, no need to push yourself forward at somebody else’s expense, no need to put yourself first and the devil take the hindmost, because the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and first and last shall have no meaning, for all of us will be drawn into a circle of love that leaves no one out.

We don’t have to earn that love. It is already here right now and is being poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit [Romans 5:5]. So if you’re feeling tired this morning, if you’re stressed, if you’re worried and afraid, that’s OK. No matter how many changes you are going through, you are rooted in the love of God that nothing and nobody can take away. Get financial advice if you need to, and do your best to make wise financial decisions for yourself and your family, but rest assured that your value as a human being does not depend on your income or your net worth, on your material possessions or the size of your portfolio.

In a time of turbulence, the only thing to cling to -- the only thing that lasts - is the love of God. That’s a rule that God won’t change: God loves you to the core. Jesus gave his life for you, and he gave his Holy Spirit to you, so that you too might walk through this world just as he did: with the conviction that the kingdom of God is at hand and that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Hold fast to that love, for it is God’s gift to you, and you don’t have to do a thing to deserve it. Yes, we need to work to survive, but at our core, we don’t need to work to be loved unconditionally. Our deepest identity is not tied to the stock market, and our deepest security has nothing to do with our financial situation or with the fluctuations or even the collapse of our economy.

When you catch that biblical vision that you are loved, and the next guy is loved, and that God’s love is particularly outstretched to the forgotten and the poor, then you not only walk through life with a deep serenity – you also walk through life with a fire for justice, with a longing to create a society in which no one needs

¹ Fred B. Craddock et al., *Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A: After Pentecost*, Abingdon, 1987, p. 200.

to choose between paying a fuel bill or feeding a child, a society in which economic and political leaders are held accountable for their actions and in which greed, selfishness, and corruption at the expense of others and to the detriment of the common good are simply not tolerated. We are a new creation in Christ, and our ministry is to continually re-fashion our families, communities, nation, and world in light of that God-given vision.

I'd like to put in a good word for our adult ed offerings this fall, all of which are intended to equip us for this ministry and to give us the support we need to keep our eyes on the kingdom of heaven and to hold fast to the things that shall endure.

If you are looking for the "peace that passes understanding" and for a more vital and intimate relationship with God, I hope that you will come to one of the Quiet Days that we hold every month on a Saturday, or to the three-week series on prayer that I will be leading on Wednesday nights in October.

If you are fed up with the contempt and scorn, the lies and innuendo that are filling public conversations as we head toward the Presidential election -- if you want to re-commit yourself to speaking in a way that is both truthful and compassionate -- if you want to develop some skills in how to communicate in a centered, honest way when you are tempted to fly off the handle and say something you'll regret to your parent or spouse or child -- then I hope you'll join me in a free class in nonviolent communication led by two guest teachers on a Wednesday night in October, and register for the special 6-week course on Monday nights that we will offer for a small fee.

If you want to learn how to live from a place of abundance and gratitude rather than a place of scarcity and fear, then I hope you'll register right away for a special Quiet Day on stewardship that will be led in two weeks by the much-respected retreat leader, Charles Lafond.

If you want to dig into the Gospel of Mark and learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus -- if you want to think critically about the relationship between God and politics -- if you want to befriend your mortality and to learn the wisdom that can only come from facing death -- if you want to participate in the MDG movement to eradicate poverty around the world -- then there is something in this program that should appeal to you. Today, after the service, we'll hold our first Forum of the year, as the Rev. Chris Carlisle speaks about college ministry in Amherst and a new collaboration between UMass and Grace Church.

We may not like to live in a world of flux, but in these uncertain times we give thanks to the God whose love undergirds our lives and whose power radiates through our words and hands as we work together to create a better world.