

Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 20A) September 18, 2011
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-40

Matthew 20:1-16

Grumbling in the vineyard

The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness. (Psalm 145:8)

Here's a question. How do we bear witness to God in a society that is increasingly secular and pluralistic? That's the question we're invited to discuss with Rob Hirschfeld after today's service, in our first Sunday Forum of the season. It's a great question, and in some ways a perennial one, too. How do we bear witness to the sacred in a society that is so driven by other values, and in which speaking about quote-unquote "God" can seem like so much empty chatter? Jesus faced this question, too, and it's interesting to notice that he often spoke about God, and the kingdom of God, not in direct terms, as if he were giving a linear, logical lecture, but sideways -- in parables and stories that are full of paradox and surprise, in periods of silence, in embodied acts and gestures -- as if the reality and mystery of the divine can never be captured directly in ordinary speech, but only conveyed indirectly, maybe in a story that catches us off-guard or in a question or an action that suddenly pierces our heart.

Take today's Gospel, for example. "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Jesus begins, and off he goes into a story that looks perfectly ordinary. A landowner goes out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard, agrees with the laborers to pay them the usual daily wage, and sends them out into his vineyard to work. The day goes by, and at different intervals -- at around 9 o'clock and noon, at about 3 o'clock and 5, the owner goes back to the marketplace and hires more workers, promising to pay what is fair. So far, so good -- and I must say that we who listen to this story, we who have been experiencing in this country a soaring rate of unemployment and underemployment, and a growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor -- we probably find it satisfying to hear a story about an employer who can hire so many workers, and who can relieve so much anxiety and give so many people and their families the promise at the end of the day of a nourishing meal and a good night's sleep.

But then the story takes an unexpected twist: the landowner pays the fellows who were hired at the eleventh hour a full day's pay. He gives a full day's pay to the

folks who worked for one hour and for three hours, for six hours and for nine. Everyone gets a full day's pay. No exceptions. And the laborers who worked the longest hours start to grumble. "Hey," they object. "That's not fair! We're entitled to more! If you give those who worked only a short time a full day's pay, then you should give us -- I don't know -- *two* day's pay!" Actually, if you look closely at the text, you'll notice that it's not only, or maybe even mainly, the equality in *pay* that most irks the laborers who complain -- it's the equality in value that the landowner seems to be assigning to the workers themselves. "You have made them equal to us" (Matthew 20:12), object the angry workers, as if to say, "We're better than they are, can't you understand that?"

I don't know about you, but I can identify with that voice of envy and entitlement. Any child who has vied with a sibling for their mother's love and attention can understand the anxious and sometimes petulant concern that everything be divvied up fairly. If Tommy got to have two cookies, then I should get two cookies, too. If I raked the lawn for three hours, and Tommy raked for one -- plus half the time he was horsing around -- well, I should get paid a whole lot more than he does!

That is how our usual transactions work: we invest such-and-such an amount of time and effort, and we expect to be paid accordingly. The resources of love and money are limited, and we've got to hustle to get what we want. We've got to earn it and compete for it, and if necessary to push our neighbor out of the way, so that -- bring it on! -- we can finally receive our just desserts.

But along comes this generous landowner, and our notions of merit and entitlement are thrown out the window. In God's economy, *everyone* receives the full love of God. God's love isn't parceled out in dribs and drabs, so that a person over here receives this much, and a person over there receives that much. No, God's love and grace are given entirely and fully to each and every person without regard for merit or achievement. God doesn't care about merit -- God loves you completely. God doesn't care about achievement -- God loves you completely. God doesn't even care about time. You may have spent a lifetime in the earnest search for God and to do God's will. Or until this moment you may have spent your whole life running away from God, frittering away your days on trivia and distractions, wasting yourself on selfish or malicious pursuits. In a way, it doesn't matter. God's love is always available now, in each present moment. Right here, on this very spot, right now, in this very breath, here is God's love, reaching out to embrace us and to call us home, welling up within us to fill every aching, empty, and desolate place.

That is the love we want to experience and to which we want to bear witness in the world: a divine love that cannot be earned or achieved, but only received, a love that from moment to moment is always circulating within us, and to which we can always return whenever we get lost or forget who we are. Tap into that stream of love, and we can relinquish our compulsive drive to prove ourselves and promote ourselves. We don't have to any more: we are complete. We have everything we need. We breathe in God's love, taking it into our depths, and we breathe it out, so that it can be fully expressed in the world.

Knowing that we are completely loved by God can give us a deep serenity, but it's not going to make us lie down and eat grapes. No, it's going to send us out to do the work that God has given us to do: to love and serve God with gladness and singleness of heart.

As I look at next weekend, I see that we have plenty of opportunities for expressing that love, for bringing it more fully into the world. Some of you will be coming to Grace Church on Saturday morning to offer several hours of much-needed clean-up work. On Saturday afternoon some of you will gather at 4 o'clock for a fundraiser and book event to benefit the little school in Haiti, St. Mathieu de Bayonnais, whose students and families and faculty we've taken under our wing, and who in turn are giving us the gift of their hope and faith. Some of you will have personal things to attend to that I know nothing about.

And next Saturday some of you -- I hope many of you -- will carpool with me to join a climate rally at a park on the Boston waterfront. It turns out that September has been a rousing month for the climate movement. September began with the so-called Tar Sands Action in Washington, D.C., in which more than 1200 people, including our own Lucy Robinson, were arrested for an act of peaceful civil disobedience at the White House to protest the proposed Keystone XL pipeline, which would carry dirty tar sand oil from Canada down to Texas at a potentially disastrous environmental cost.

Next Saturday, the last weekend of the month, thousands of climate rallies will be held around the world as part of what's being called Moving Planet day (<http://www.moving-planet.org/>), a day to get us moving beyond fossil fuels. For people living in New England the most important rally to attend is the one in Boston, one of five cities nationwide that climate organizers have targeted as the best site for a massive demonstration (<http://moving-newengland.org/>). If you can't get to Boston on Saturday, you can attend a local rally in Amherst (<http://amherst350.org/>), Northampton, or Greenfield -- we've got information posted on the Greening bulletin board. And if your Saturday next week is already spoken for and you want

to help build the climate movement, you can join me next Sunday after the St. Michael's picnic at an afternoon rally in Northampton that will include a walk across the Coolidge Bridge and a gathering for music and speeches.

I have been asked to give an interfaith prayer both at the rally in Boston on Saturday and at the rally in Northampton on Sunday. And I've been wondering what to say. When I look out at the crowds, how can I convey the love of God? How can I let them know that within them and among them is a source of energy that is always clean and always renewed? How can I let them know that their struggle to create a sustainable world will be strengthened and renewed if it is guided by the divine love that sustains all things? As far as I know, I could be the only person in the line-up of speakers who communicates a religious perspective, and I know that I will be addressing a crowd of folks from a range of faiths, and no faith at all -- "spiritual but not religious"; "post-Christian." I can't use the language of our tradition, for traditional Christian words only shut some people down and drive them away. I can't mention Jesus, or the power of the cross and the resurrection, or the gift of the Eucharist. I can't say much about the power of meditation and prayer, much less refer to the story of the laborers in the vineyard. But, God willing, the love of God in Christ will still inform what I do, and will still give me words to speak. Whether we name it or not, and whether we perceive it or not, God's love is always being poured out to us, right here, right now, in full abundance, with nothing held back.

Maybe it will be enough to ask everyone to feel their feet on the ground, and to make conscious contact with the earth. Maybe it will be enough to ask everyone to stretch out their hands, and to sense the hands of everyone the world over who is fighting with us for a better world. Maybe it will be enough to ask everyone to take a deep breath, and to remember that with every breath we are exchanging the elements of life with all green-growing things. How good it is to wake up to the present moment, and to sense our connection with the earth and all its creatures! How good it is to marvel for a moment at the sheer gift of being alive!

These are things I can say, and will say. But secretly I'll be giving thanks for the kingdom of God. Secretly I'll be giving thanks for God's absurd generosity, for being like an extravagant landowner who gives everyone a full day's wages, no matter how much or how little each person has worked. Secretly I'll be praising the "LORD [who] is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness" (Psalm 145:8).