Twenty-Fifth Sunday of the Year, A

St. Mary’s in Riverside, 2020

Like some of you, I am supposed to be retired

And like many who inhabit that ambiguous state

I don’t yet exactly know what that means.

When you tell people you are retired

It can conjure visions of stress free days

open calendars

lots of carefree socializing

and the occasional trip to exotic places like Tahiti …

I’ve never been to Tahiti.

While my life is way less stressed than before retirement

many tasks still populate my days.

There are the ordinary routines of grocery shopping & lawn care

the ministry commitments like preaching

and recently I picked up a job as a part time janitor

at a relative’s small and struggling business.

The main reason I got hire

is not only because I know how to wield a mop

and inherited the family cleaning gene

but most importantly because the price was right:

I work for free.

There are many folk in our society today

Who don’t have the luxury of working for free

And need an income to support self and family.

This is increasingly true for folk of post-social security age

Whose benefits do not cover even essentials

like health care and housing.

Even if they wanted to, they can’t retire.

While the unemployment rate is down from it’s high in May

it is still over 8%

and for people of color significantly higher.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Lots of folk are looking for work.

Those looking for work might be surprised to find

That there is actually verifiable science

That provides real help when applying for a job.

For example, one celebrated study considers

How recruiters evaluate an applicant’s “fit” -

that illusive capacity to enter effectively into a company’s culture.

Data suggests that the oft used tactic of self-promotion,

speaking highly of yourself in an interview

and outlining your many successes and accomplishments

does not seem to have much of a positive impact

on your hiring potential.

Rather, the tactic of ingratiation

the ability to read the social cues of the interviewers,

to show interest in their interests,

in other words, the ability to be likeable,

is a securer path to getting that job

than boasting about your past achievements.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The reason I take this excursion

Into the science of getting hired

is because of the lectionary texts presented to us today

And the somewhat disturbing HR path the Only-begotten

takes in recruiting believers and ministers.

Study after study demonstrates that what workers want the most

what keeps them in their jobs

is the feeling that they are truly appreciated

Individually and as a group.[[3]](#endnote-3)

On the other hand, while some competition can be useful

Evidence shows that perceived acts of unfairness

resulting in envy or jealousy

Can generate rivalries that can derail effectiveness

And generate higher levels of counterproductive work behavior.[[4]](#endnote-4)

If the so called parable of the laborers in the vineyard is to be believed

Jesus apparently went to a different management school

for his MBA

For at first blush that parable seems designed

To sow division among the laborers

And insure jealousy among those who labored the hardest.

Consider, for example, the payment strategy employed here.

The owner intentionally has his foreman

first pay the workers who did the least amount of labor

while paying those who had labored through the whole day last,

insuring that the all day laborers would witness

the perceived inequities in his pay structure.

The owner could have paid the dawn to dusk workers first,

dismissed them and then paid the 9:00 a.m. hires

dismissed them and then turned to the noon group

then the three p.m. hires

and finally the late hired laborers.

That way no one group would have needed to hang around

While the subsequent hires were paid,

Eliminating perceptions of inequity or sparking feelings of envy.

But Jesus and his landlord alter ego take the opposite tact.

And you have to ask yourself

if Jesus the just

if Jesus the community builder

If Jesus the righteous

might not be as consistent as we would like the son of God to be

or is there something else here going on in this gospel

as there usually is!

We get some help here from the British literary critique Frank Kermode

While a specialist on Shakespeare

he also studied scripture and wrote a commentary

On Matthew’s literary style

which he characterized as a “rhetoric of excess.” [[5]](#endnote-5)

Just think of all of the exaggerated language

We run across in Matthew, e.g.,

* About having a log in own eye while trying to remove the splinter from the eye of another (7:5)
* Or camels going through the eye of a needle (19:24)
* And maybe most outrageous of all, the call to love our neighbor as our self (22:39)

Kermode puts todays parable in this same category of exaggeration

another example of the rhetoric of excess.

Such an interpretation certainly resonates with the wisdom

From today’s first reading from the prophet Isaiah

who reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways

that “as high as the heavens are above the earth”

so high are God’s ways above our ways

God’s thoughts above our thoughts.

Centering our reflections on the excessive exaggeration of Matthew

as a symbol of the excessive generosity of God

might be enough for this homiletic moment

And now might be a good time for me to sit down …

But I won’t …

Because in the midst of all of the exaggerated language

and hyperbolic storytelling going on in this gospel

Also embedded in this gospel is a plea from the underemployed

and from the many other undervalued.

It comes in that throw-away line from the gospel

after the landowner finds unemployed workers at 5:00 p.m.

and inquires “why do you stand here idle all day?”

their response – “Because no one has hired us.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Notice that the gospel recognizes that these are not bums

They didn’t just show up at 5:00 looking for work

They had been standing there unemployed all day!

So why hadn’t they been hired?

Maybe, at least in my imagination,

Because the landlord might have had a problem.

Maybe he had been trained in a management style

That, like so much of corporate America today

Hires for “fit” … hires for “conformity”

So that there will be good assimilation into the company

Insuring that these new workers won’t be rabble rousers

And instead help maintain the status quo.

Hiring for fit certainly has much to commend it

but it also can be a not so subtle shield against difference

a ploy to keep the “other” out

a strategy to control the access to power and privilege.

Maybe the idlers were overlooked because they were too old

or didn’t have a green card

or spoke broken English

or maybe they had a disability –

or just weren’t dressed for the job.

On the other hand, maybe a few didn’t show up until 4:45

Because they didn’t have child care

and couldn’t leave the kids until Mom got home

from her job as a domestic

or maybe some didn’t have enough money on their bus pass

and had to walk the 12 miles into town

or maybe because some suffered from depression

daily overwhelmed by their poverty or family situation

and it took all their energy just to get out of bed

much less out of the house

expecting to be disappointed all over again

during another crushing day of subsistent living.

Maybe after a long day of going back & forth to the market place

It finally dawned on the landowner

That hiring for fit was not always just

And maybe it was time to hire for inclusion.

Maybe he had a conversion, like his alter ego Jesus did

A few chapters back (Mt. 15:21-28)

when confronting that Canaanite woman.

So he took a chance, employed those

who at first assessment didn’t quite seem to fit

And in his own conversion, at the end of the day

Renewed their dignity, offered them a resurrection of sorts

And sent them home with enough money

That might tide their families over

Until God’s generosity unexpectantly arose again.

We live today in many economies, in many politics

Some are designed for fit and some for inclusion

Some claim righteousness and others beg for mercy

Some argue for fairness and others plead for generosity.

We cannot mirror the excess of God

The extravagance of the Holy One

The inclusivity of the Christ

But maybe we can embrace the love embedded in the parent

Who pours herself out for her children at great price.

A nine year old had been talking with his friends, and realized that some of them were getting allowances, paid for doing things around the house, and he wasn’t. So, after some thought during the dishes, while his mother was in the kitchen alone, he gave her a piece of paper that read, “taking out the trash, $1.00 per week; making my bed every day and keeping my room clean, $3.00 per week; watching my baby sister $3.00 per week and doing my home every night, $3.00 per week.”

The mother read the “bill” carefully, and then sat down at the table, took a pen from a drawer in the kitchen, and wrote on the other side of the paper:

* “For carrying you with love for 9 months, despite all the morning sickness and discomfort – no charge;
* for waking up multiple times every night to nurse you when you were just an infant – no charge;
* for changing all of those diapers, cleaning all those runny noses, and singing you to sleep each night – no charge;
* for caring for you when you were sick, for comforting you when you were upset, for all those hugs when you felt badly, and for the kisses that I have showered upon you since the first time I held you in my arms – no charge.”

The 9 year old read over his mother’s shoulder as she wrote, and when she had finished, he borrowed the pen and wrote at the bottom of the page, “paid in full.”

So today we receive a similar missive from God:

* For taking on our flawed humanity, no charge;
* For a hidden life of learning and loving in backwater Nazareth, no charge;
* For 3 years of public ministry riddled with rejection and scorn,

no charge;

* For public humiliation and injustice, culminating in public execution on a cross, no charge;
* And for entering the underworld, sundering the bonds of death and offering us eternal life, no charge.

Our salvation has been paid in full ... paid in full,

even before we ever thought to ask.

The call to excessive inclusivity and prodigal generosity

Is now ours to embrace as well,

without charge,

through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://tradingeconomics.com/united-states/unemployment-rate#:~:text=Unemployment%20Rate%20in%20the%20United,percent%20in%20May%20of%201953>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://timothy-judge.com/Higgins-Judge%20IB-Recruiters%20JAP.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Harvard Business Review, <https://hbr.org/2012/01/why-appreciation-matters-so-mu.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Journal of Applied Psychology, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17484549/> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “Matthew,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible,* ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 387-401, here p. 391. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Some of these ideas are from https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1500-a-troubling-generosity [↑](#endnote-ref-6)