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)