All Saints’ Church September 24, 2017

Proper 20 Year A

Jonah 3:10-4:11 Philippians 1:21-30

Psalm 145:1-8 Matthew 20:1-16

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

I am the laborer who showed up early for work:

I heard a rumor that a landowner was hiring.

I went home that night, energized.

I organize members of my family- all of you- so we can all go.

I set out our work clothes for the next day.

I calculate how long it will take us to walk to where we need to be, hopefully we will be the first to show up.

I set my alarm.

I pack our lunches.

We are going to work, halleluiah; we are going to get paid, halleluiah; we are going to put food on our table, halleluiah!

And maybe, just maybe, if we work hard enough, we’ll be noticed and hired for a second day!

I begin to dream for a better future for us.

As the day unfolds, I pay little attention to the very strange actions of the landowner. Who goes out hiring during the middle of the day, and for those standing idle in the marketplace? Who wants those people? Did I think they are lazy? Yeah. Hanger-on’ers?…. Probably. Worthless?….Sure. But the landowner gets my attention when he comes back after 5:00 with even more laborers. It’s the end of the day- so late- what a waste- those ragged ones are useless!

But with these last ones, I’m starting to get worried. What were their arrangements with the landowner? Are they willing to work for less than we are, for free, maybe? They are a threat to us. If they will work for free, then we don’t have work tomorrow. I am anxious. I want them out of the vineyard.

But it’s so late in the day, we don’t have time to worry- we are called out to receive our pay. We are at the end of the line. We’re tired and hungry, and now we have to wait….. but look those useless ones are getting paid a day’s wage. And so are the others- those who came at 3:00 and at noon.

Maybe we misunderstood, maybe this landowner pays more than any other landowner. Maybe he’s special? Maybe he really cares about us? Maybe we can rely on him and him on us? Maybe we can have a partnership- a covenant. He sees that we are worthy, that we are special because we work so hard.

We begin to dream about more pay, a better future, our value, connected to our capacity to work …. But then he gives us only a day’s wage, just like the others….. How can that be? How can this landowner think we are equal to those worthless ones? It’s just not right, not true, not fair. We’ve worked hard- don’t equate us with those scum.

A few years ago, PJ O’Rourke, a satirist and columnist, was a guest speaker at Exeter. Our students who identified themselves as conservative were thrilled and they had lunch with him, complaining that things at Exeter were not fair. They had no voice. The liberals dominated. They were ridiculed. Nobody paid them any attention.

It just wasn’t fair.

And he said, “My daughter came to me just the other day, crying to me about life not being fair. And I said to her, ‘That’s right, and aren’t you lucky that life is not fair. You are beautiful and smart and your daddy is rich. It’s a good thing for you that life is not fair. I wouldn’t complain too much. Heaven forbid things might change and then you’d really be in trouble.”

And then he turned to the students. “You are all laborers in the field. You’re lucky to be here. Work together- just maybe together, you might find the kingdom.”

Remarkable.

The scenario I dreamed up- the one where I packed our lunches, set out our clothes, got a good night’s sleep- that was all a fantasy, a presumption of privilege.

You see, as day laborers, during Jesus’ day, we have no extra clothes to set out, no lunches to pack, no planning, no luxury of creating strategies. We have nothing. We are nothing. We just got lucky to land in the vineyard, with enough strength to work. Those latecomers? They are taking care of a sick mother or a sick child, or burying their father or dealing with a member of their family who is addicted, or depressed or wounded. Or they’re too hungry to work under a scorching sun.

Or maybe they got caught up in an earthquake or a hurricane, Harvey, or Irma or Jose or Maria, and there is no water, no electricity, no food, with children trapped behind walls or a damn about to break and no way to warn those downstream of danger.

Nope, they can’t show up on time at the vineyard- latecomers all of them.

And so what does Jesus do. He pays everyone the same, no matter. He takes this opportunity to preach radical equality. Jesus knows there is no us or them, no haves or have nots, no better, no worse, no latecomers. There’s only the kingdom of God. We’re in this “kingdom work” together, equally, no matter how- let’s do it.

And let’s remember- if we are not working toward the Kingdom of God, we are in the hands of another kingdom, at the mercy of a ruthless order- a kingdom that believes we are only worth what we can produce, or buy or negotiate. It’s a kingdom that believes scarcity reigns, fear motivates, and that some of us are more deserving than others, granted access to power and resources, health and education, when others are not. And those “others” can be used and discarded. It’s a kingdom that kills love, fuels cynicism, abuses power, and destroys community.

Jesus knows this kingdom well. It killed him. It has its force, but it’s not real. The only real thing is the Kingdom of God…. A kingdom where God becomes the Lord of our mind, not the world.

Life is not a talent show. Life is about loving each other’s humanity.

How can we be laborers working for the Kingdom of God?

As many of you know we have neighbors who are food-insecure. “Food banks in our state are experiencing declines in donated food from major food wholesalers, retailers and producers due to tighter inventory controls, less stock on hand, reduced revenue, smaller margins and the closing of twelve significant partner stores. At the same time, the need for food resources has continued to increase.” (*New Hampshire Tackles Hunger*, 2017).

Kids are hungry. And they are our kids. We see them at our Community Supper, at the Serendipity Shop, in Juarez. And we are involved.

This summer, we did something very simple. All Saints’ provided snacks for kids who could no longer rely on their school meals because it was summer. You were amazing. Every Sunday, we blessed an overflowing basket of snacks, and because of your generosity, kids joined their parents in the food pantry. Every week there was a little gift designed for them. A snack bag, with enough snacks for three days. They liked coming- there was something there for them. (not just those darn staples).

In the midst of so much hunger and pain, this seems like nothing, but as our Presiding Bishop reminds us, “We can’t do everything, but we can do something.”

Well, this little light of ours is continuing to shine. We have the opportunity to build on a program that is involving social workers and nurses who are coordinating with teachers and they are letting us know that snacks are vital for the school week. Our kids are hungry. And so what can we do?

There are ten schools within the ConVal district who have identified need. We can make boxes of snacks- some schools need one box per term, others need three. The social workers and nurses are all over it. And we have earned their trust. They want us to partner with them to make a difference. They are inviting us in to become a part of their work to change lives. If each one of us once a month brought a healthy snack, we can prepare enough snack boxes for the year.

And so, a child when she comes to school, will be able to go see the nurse to get her snack for her backpack. But what is so remarkable, is that this child in need is connected with a nurse or with a social worker. She’s being cared for, and she is building trust and a relationship. She doesn’t feel so alone. Or embarrassed. She feels a sense of her own worth because she is no longer isolated, a late-comer, a hungry child, someone to ignore. And we are a part of building up her kingdom of hope. And not leaving the teachers out on their own trying to fill the need by themselves.

What a privilege. It’s not everything, but it’s something and it will make a difference for that little girl and for us. And we are being invited in to do this good work. We can become partners.

Life is not a talent show. Life is about loving each other’s humanity. This is the kingdom of God.