

14 Pentecost, Proper 20 – September 18, 2011
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Cathedral Church of St. Paul

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11
Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1: 21-30
Matthew 20: 1-16

Magic Penny

In the name of God the Creator of Love, God the Beloved, and God the Spirit of Love –

So...the last will be first, and the first will be last. Does this mean we should not try and do our best or work hard and be passionate about our work? Certainly not, rather today's challenging Gospel reading is about fairness and grace and also about how we choose to conceive of our work – as burden or blessing. In the parable we are presented with a landowner and five waves of workers hired early in the morning, at 9 in the morning, at noon, at three, and again at five o'clock a last group is hired that no one has yet hired. In short, the landowner pays all the workers the same amount of money no matter how long they have worked. The all-day workers challenge the landowner saying, "These last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us..." All were paid the "usual daily wage" of one denarius. One denarius, it turns out, was barely a subsistence wage.

Clearly these workers were paid very poorly and all struggled to make ends meet. They are similar to workers hired on street corners in Boston, New York, Los Angeles or other big cities who gather each day to do yard work, construction or other piece meal jobs at very low wages with no benefits and without assurance that they will work again the next day. They make barely enough for the most minimal food for their families and sometimes not enough for this. In fact, we have more and more people right in Burlington hoping for any job with no assurance of even the most minimal daily wage.

At first glance employers, teachers and parents may distrust this parable because it seems to be making a case for not working hard or completing the tasks of the day since those who only work a little get as much as those who work a lot. Don't worry parents, the message of this parable is NOT don't do your homework, or don't practice your instrument or don't train for your sport! Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, this is not an anti-puritan ethic parable that promotes shirking over the rewards of diligence, task completion, hard work well done, or the rights and needs of those who came first. What it is, instead, is a reminder to us that everyone deserves a daily wage, a livable wage if you will. We all deserve sufficient money and food. *Give us today our daily bread* could easily be re-stated as *give us today our daily wage*.

In our country today we are witnessing a frightening disparity in income between the wealthiest few and the rest of our citizens. In November I will be going to a PICO clergy conference. PICO stands for: People Improving Communities through Organizing, the faith-based parent organization of our own Vermont Interfaith Action. The purpose of the conference is to look at and learn ways that faith communities can respond to this inequality. Jesus, in this and other parables, is clear on this point –

equality, justice, and sufficiency for all of God's people is core to the Good News. Some are not to suffer for the wealth, pleasure and the excess of a few.

Imagine, if you will, a new seventh grade student in Burlington – perhaps a refugee from another country – who arrives at Edmonds Middle School in March after everyone else has been working hard from September. Or...what if a new choir member joined you half way through the church program year? Would you feel angry that Mark gave as much attention and vocal coaching to that new choir member? Does this new student or singer deserve the same considerations, supports and attention given to those who have been participating all year? I believe so, and perhaps these new participants might even deserve a little bit of additional compassion and support to adjust to a new school or a new country or a new musical group so they don't feel like outsiders. Offering this compassion and support takes nothing from those who have been working hard all year – in fact it most likely adds value to their school experience and makes the class or choir stronger and better.

Now, let us extend our thinking to other populations who may be “last” in our society: those with disabilities, refugees, those out of work, homeless people, people of color, lesbian-gay-bisexual or transgendered people, or children who seem different in some way and are vulnerable to bullying. I'm sure you can think of other populations of people that I have not mentioned. How can God's grace be extended to these people?

If we view work only as something we do because we are rewarded with a wage or other benefits, we deny the possibility of passion and the movement of God's grace in our daily endeavors. I have recently had the rewarding experience of asking some of you to contribute three consecutive weeks to teach our Sunday school pre-kindergarten and kindergarten class. To my delight, people are saying “yes.” One person responded, “It was not hard to say ‘yes’ because you presented something that was not overwhelming; three weeks feels do-able.” My request was not viewed as a burden. As a result, teaching our wonderful children transforms from burden to grace.

Kathryn D. Blanchard writes in her commentary on this passage, wrote: *Those who serve God only because they want to avoid punishment or obtain payment do so in the manner of a servant; whereas those who see working in God's vineyard as a gift, labor without coercion, in the manner of offspring who love and wish to please the parent and are dedicated to the parent's work...Some are especially blessed to hear the call early on; but if they experience this labor as a burden, the gift is lost on them. Others are blessed to hear the call just before it is too late; for them, the burden seems light and the reward comes before they grow weary...It is clear that a responsible theological reading of this parable tends toward radical equality in the church, in which all are equally near to receiving God's gracious reward.*

Today is the first day of Sunday school. It is an exciting time as children and youth gather downstairs with their teachers. I have the pleasure of visiting Sunday school and this year of being more involved in the curriculum for the preschool/kindergarten group. My experience with all of our teachers and helpers is that they have a passion for this work and that, for them, the burden is light and the reward is great. Earlier this week one of our long-time Sunday school teachers handed me a parish priest's remarks on a passage from The Acts of the Apostles. She found in on a folded piece of paper in the back of the Sunday school closet downstairs that she had been cleaning and organizing. Acts, chapter 4, verse 18 reads: *They saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized*

they were uneducated and ordinary men. In the commentary, the clergy person wrote: My least favorite task as parish priest was recruiting Sunday school teachers. Well-educated people would beg off saying, "Ask me to do anything but that." When I asked why, nearly all said, "I just don't know enough. I am afraid I would say the wrong thing." The parish priest concluded by writing: All it requires is a faithful attempt at telling the truth, in love, of what Jesus means to you.

Here at St. Paul's all the Sunday school teachers I have talked to tell me a version of the same thing that boils down to: *Love the children, be yourself, and teach them that God is always present and that God loves them wholly and completely.* This is the concept on which I based the simple curriculum that I wrote: *God is love, and God's love is clear in the love and nurturance between parents and their children. From this loving care we develop an inner image of the nurturer and this image becomes a basic part of our understanding of God and of the certainty of God's love. It is our job is to extend this foundational love to friends, neighbors and the world.*

Today we will be honoring the lay ministry of formation. This includes our Sunday school teachers, Education for Ministry mentors, and leaders of Adult Education, Christian Initiation Process, and Bible study. In them we find a group of people who are not afraid of "saying the wrong thing" and who understand that offering themselves is the core of this ministry. They are an example of lay ministry jobs not being a burden but rather a sure example of the gift of God's grace. And, when we extend God's love into all we do, the burden becomes light and the reward grows in all we do here at St. Paul's. This sense of grace extends to all our lay ministries as long as our hearts are open: Parish Life, Altar Guild, Flower Guild, Eucharistic Ministers, Acolytes, Office helpers, Vestry, Building and Grounds, Jubilee Social Justice, and on and on. My hope is that our four Clusters will demonstrate grace in the face of hard work and radiate fun, passion, commitment, engagement and welcome.

This morning, the younger children in Sunday school will start their time together with Jen Debadout who will lead them in singing a wonderful song, *Magic Penny*. This simple song contains a radical message of God's love for all, of God's gift of grace. It is a powerful message about radical equality – a world in which, through love, all of God's children are "equally near to receiving God's gracious reward." We all deserve to earn God's daily wage and to receive God's daily bread. Perhaps the magic penny in this song is also a magic denarius! For those of you who don't know the song, these are the words:

*Love is something if you give it away,
give it away, give it away.*

*Love is something if you give it away,
you'll end up having more.*

*For it's just like a magic penny,
hold on tight and you won't have any.*

*Lend it, spend it and you'll have so
many, they'll roll all over the floor.*

*For, love is something if you give it
away, give it away, give it away
Love is something if you give it away,
you'll end up having more.*

AMEN