

# Pentecost 16

## Year A

### Sermon

#### Gospel

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

## **Prayer:**

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

## **Sermon:**

Jesus said

**“... the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

What did he mean by that?

Some preachers say he meant that “God has the little guy’s back.”

Others say he meant “God will make you rich!”

Others that the scales of justice will be balanced in heaven,  
even if you get the shaft down here.<sup>i</sup>

God has broad shoulders. *And* she has strong arms.

But can we hold God responsible for our mistakes?

I think not.

I know that God has the little guy’s back.

But that wasn’t Jesus’ point.

Jesus wanted us to know that we have a job to do.

No one is called to wait in line, for God’s benevolent charity.

Today's Gospel isn't about some rich guy getting what he deserves.

Today's Gospel isn't about me getting what I deserve.

Today's Gospel isn't all about "Me", at all.

And it isn't about You.

It's about the other guy.

The Good News isn't about Me or You is not a popular message.

It's pure Christianity. They killed Jesus for it.

**... the last will be first, and the first will be last.**

The Rich man said:

I'm "... allowed to do what I choose, with what belongs to me!"

But Jesus said:

- give to the poor;
- support the aged and sick;
- cherish the orphan.

Dana and I raised our girls in the Central Valley of California.

It's the Appalachia of the West.

Back home, the people who pick our fruit live in desperate poverty.

They work 12-hour days, in hot smoggy air.

Or maybe, they work three part-time shifts,

Just to rent a clap-trap apartment.

Our political chatter focuses on ourselves and our needs,  
The conversation has to be about them too.

**“... the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

We have to think about others.

Jesus made that clear; *it's not optional.*<sup>ii</sup>

**“... the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

*Jesus calls each of us to live generously -- for others.*<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus's message is simple,

But it's hard to wrap your heart and mind around it.

*Maybe that's why it's in all three synoptic Gospels.*<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus calls us to generously share what we have.

Whether it is little, or it is much.

Today, one politician might agitate to distribute wealth.

*What's in it for him?*

Another politician might fight to protect wealth.<sup>v</sup>

*What's in it for her?*

Amidst the uproar, Jesus' voice is hard to hear.

**“... the last will be first, and the first will be last.”**

*But we all know that we are not called to protect our wealth.*

*We are called to share it. Generously.*

As a child, even when Dad was working, we were hungry. *A lot.*

We ate cornmeal and boiled cabbage. *A lot.*

I was the man of the house by the time I hit 16 years.

Mom needed money for food and rent. I learned to bus tables.

High school. Graveyard shift. 50 hours a week.

Stuff happens. And *I was lucky.*

- I was promoted to graveyard shift fry cook.<sup>vi</sup>
- Once the restaurant owner loaned me money.
- The night shift manager gave me food.<sup>vii</sup>
- Folks made jokes to boost my spirits.
- The waitresses were patient.<sup>viii</sup>

Rich people don't work the graveyard shift.

These were not people of great means.

They were people of great heart.<sup>ix</sup>

They heard God's call<sup>x</sup>, to focus on someone else.

Whoever. Wherever. However.

*Red, Brown, Yellow, Black, and White.*

*We are precious in his sight.*<sup>xi</sup>

Being poor and hungry is not a magical step to inner peace.<sup>xii</sup>

I've been poor. I've been hungry. *It's awful.*

*There's no peace on an empty stomach.*<sup>xiii</sup>

My help came from God, through the hands of working people –  
who had a little bit more than me.

They lifted me up because it was the right thing to do.

It's what Jesus would have done. It's what we must do.

Social scientists say that poor people are more generous  
than the rich.<sup>xiv</sup> But, I already knew that. <sup>xv</sup>

Our United States is the wealthiest of nations.

But we are only the 23<sup>rd</sup> <sup>xvi</sup> most happy.<sup>xvii</sup>

I watched a great documentary called “Happy”<sup>xviii</sup>.

People in Iceland, and in Puerto Rico are happy.

So was a rickshaw operator in India.

And an aging Brazilian surfer.

And so was a family of crab-fishing Cajuns. <sup>xix</sup>

It's really, really hard to be happy, when you're hungry. <sup>xx</sup>

But a garage full of stuff is not a way to find peace.

God designed us to need love, food and shelter.

Those basic needs must be met.

Everything after that is more than we need.

And there will always be someone who needs it more.

When Jesus said

“... it’s hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

His students asked, “Then who can be saved?”

*“With people”, Jesus said, “it’s impossible.*

*But with God, all things are possible.”*

**The “first will be last; and the last, will be first.”<sup>xxi</sup>**

**-Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Since the Reformation, theologians and philosophers have struggled to understand the relationship of faith and reason. It can be hard to sort out what Jesus meant. Do we use our minds, or do we rely on faith and faith-based teachings? The tension between faith and reason is awkward; reason has long been assumed to be a means through which Christians understand God and Creation by relying on neither dogma nor Pietistic emotionalism. It appears, however, that "reason" undid Christendom, as it also the foundation for our culture of the "expert" and the elevation of scientist and physicians above others.

With the growth of rationalism in the late 17th century, nearly everything became subject to the application of “reason”. Important thinkers include Hume, Kant, Schleiermacher, Pasquel (1623-62), Voltaire (1694-1778), Rene Descartes (1596-1650) -- who remained a Roman Catholic throughout his life -- and Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), a Jewish pantheist.

There have been three phases in the relationship between church and faith. The first focused on the supernatural character of Christian revelation and involved people such as Descartes and Voltaire. The next understood Christianity as the best example of natural relations for human beings. The third, which continues, is that reason triumphs over all else, including faith. Hence, 300 years go a person might be denounced as a Godless “faith denier”, whereas today one might be referred to, inter alia, as a Climate Change Denier.

The development of the “cult of reason” was assisted by Rousseau and his concept of the “social contract” concept, under which government authority could be questioned; neither the law nor government required Divine approval, but rather, were subject to a social contract between the leaders and the governed.

Christendom, already frazzled by its related loss of political power, suffered more under the influence of enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Harnack (1850-1930), who worked to “de-Christianize” society, or to take away its mythological “magical” basis. The Industrial Revolution accelerated these changes.

In the mid-17th century, the right of the church to be the sole interpreter of truth and knowledge (“truth” as set forth in the Scripture) was challenged as part of the Enlightenment, which was an offshoot of the movement towards the use of reason to understand God and Creation. Many cultural issues arose (e.g., the Industrial Revolution) which could not be controlled by the church, and which did, has and contuse to concentrate wealth in

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a few people -- rather than the church. Greater agricultural yields encouraged urbanization, which encouraged both the manufacture and consumption of goods, and the concentration of supplies needed for that manufacture.

The tension between faith and reason continues to trouble the church; Catholics view the Church as the sole interpreter of the relationship between God and humanity. The emphasis upon reason, and a later emphasis on , on “feeling”, both empowered the individual and disempowered both the hierarchical Roman church and the increasingly dogmatic and legalistic Protestant churches. Note, how often in conversation today, at least in America, a person will say “I feel” rather than “I think”. Note also, how often feeling influences thinking and that the increasingly little effort made to distinguish between what were previously considered two distinct processes. a person will describe what was once considered “thinking”

The Protestants and Reformed groups challenged what they viewed as Roman legalism, but subsequently developed their own legalism, eventually resulting in division over minutiae. Further, where the interpretation of Scripture is individualized through the application of a person’s rational skills, there is no need for a church organization to interpret Scripture. Thus the church became not one but many. Today there are more than 200 distinct Christian bodies in the United States, and many multiples of that, in stand along “Bible” Churches.

*Feelings* about Scripture are constantly evolving and therefore discussions about the nature of God can reach no conclusion. Furthermore, people are so busy dealing with existential issues, it’s easy to get confused, to be misinformed or partly informed, and to decide that all the discussion about God is too much trouble.

Is God really there if we don’t “feel” His presence in our lives? Is God really there if He doesn’t speak to us? Could God be speaking to anyone when everyone has different understandings about God, and His nature and His church and His work?

<sup>ii</sup> God is God. God does what God chooses to do. He’s the Boss. You and me? Not so much! “... the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

<sup>iii</sup> God chooses who shall be first and who shall be last. We cannot buy our way into to heaven. We cannot buy our way to peace or joy here.

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 19:30; Mark 10:31, and Luke 13:30. See also, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me . . .” Jeremiah 9:23-24

<sup>v</sup> Lower taxes! Get what you can, when you can, however you can.

<sup>vi</sup> The restaurant owner, Mr. Phillips, and the night shift boss, Ray Heywood, were kind and generous men.

<sup>vii</sup> An “overcooked” steak or a dozen eggs that were “too old”.

<sup>viii</sup> Mr. Phillips and Ray Heywood ... wherever you are ... God Bless and Keep You.

<sup>ix</sup> In can only pray that God will bless me with such a kind and generous spirit.

<sup>x</sup> Even if they didn’t know they heard it.

<sup>xi</sup> And we need to start acting like people who really believe that.

<sup>xii</sup> I am not a classical Romantic.

<sup>xiii</sup> Some people are really good at creating wealth – and holding onto to it. Bill Gates. Warren Buffett. Michael Bloomberg. Meg Whitman are unimaginably wealthy. And some might say: “Good for them!” But With Great

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Wealth, Comes Great Responsibility. When a billionaire agrees to contribute half of her fortune to some school or university, he or she gets a lot of favorable press. Maybe a prestigious building is named after them. And, of course, they keep the other half of their billion dollars. What will they do with that?

<sup>xiv</sup> See, Paul Piff, a psychology researcher at UC Berkeley.

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129068241>

<sup>xv</sup> Folks who thought they were poor, were 44 percent more generous, than those who saw themselves as “wealthy”.

The richer that people think they are, the less generous they become.

<sup>xvi</sup> New York Times (2005)

<sup>xvii</sup> See, “A New Measure of Well-Being from a Happy Little Kingdom” by Andrew C. Revkin.

<sup>xviii</sup> Roko Belic. (2010)

<sup>xix</sup> ...”once basic necessities like food and shelter are provided for, economic factors have relatively little to do with overall satisfaction in life.” <https://www.deseret.com/2012/2/14/20498585/happy-documentary-argues-that-everyone-can-become-happier#a-scene-from-the-documentary-film-happy>

<sup>xx</sup> Hungry? Sick? No medicine? Been there. Done that. Not going there again.

<sup>xxi</sup> “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written: “They have scattered abroad their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.” 2 Corinthians 9:6-9