

September 20, 2020

Rev Jen's 22nd Love Letter From Lockdown

Greetings from the smoke and haze,

The year 2020 continues to offer up more and more challenges. The latest one being ten days of living and breathing the smoke and ash of the death and destruction from the forest fires burning in the Pacific Northwest of the United States.

The COVID 19 pandemic moved us to staying home and staying apart. It taught us that outside was better than inside, and more physical distance was better than close intimate spacing.

The pier and forest fires now have us staying indoors with the windows closed! For our health and safety we have to limit our exposure to smoke and the toxic mix of particulate.

We cannot "get away" from the pandemic or the smoke.

Folks are tired and weary. Many struggle to breathe. We trudge along trying to keep up, trying to maintain the regular routine, trying to make the most out of a bad situation. All of us are breathing in some of the worst quality air in the world. And we have no choice about it. Here we are. All in this together. For better or for worse.

Kinda like the family...all in it together. For better or for worse.

Kinda like the church... are all in it together. For better or for worse.

Kinda like those labourers that the landowner/householder hires for his vineyard.

Although some are hired for the "daily wage" at the beginning of the workday. Some hired at nine, and at midday, and at three and at five, they are all labourers in the vineyard. They are all in it together. Working until evening. Then they are paid for the day's work beginning with the last hired and then going to the first. When all of the labourers received the same "daily wage" they grumbled against the landowner.

We the labourers grumble...we have our own ideas about what fair wages...who gets paid how much...and what we can tell the landowner/householder/employer about how to run their business? We all have our own ideas...

We the labourers...create division amongst ourselves. We create an "us" and a "them". How come "they" are getting more than "us". How come "they" are being treated the same as "us"?

We the labourers are hired to do the work in the vineyard. We are not the landowner. We do not make the rules. We are the workers. Some of us have been working for the landowner for a long time. Some of us have just shown up. And we all get paid our daily wage based on the economics of Heaven and not the economics of humanity. And there is a difference.

This week my research led me to the SALT Lectionary commentary which stated the following.

1) A householder hires laborers for his vineyard at several times over the course of a day, and ultimately compensates them all with the typical daily wage (one denarius), paying the latest arrivals first. This causes consternation among the early-arrivers - which they express, please note, as "grumbling" not that they ought to be paid more, but rather that the late-arrivers ought to be paid less: "you have made them equal to us" (Matthew 20:11-12).

2) There's a work-and-reward ethos underpinning this complaint, the idea that goods should be distributed according to the effort and excellence in "bearing the burden of the day," as the early-arrivers put it (Matthew 20:12). This rings true: indeed, it's striking to consider just how much of our everyday lives — at home, at school, at work, and even in personal relationships — is saturated with this basic idea: *you get out what you put in*. But the householder's response makes clear that this vineyard, and by extension, "the kingdom of heaven," operates with a very different, apparently upside-down logic. Divine blessings are given not according to who works the hardest, but rather according to the sovereign, generous will of the householder. Such blessings, then, are not rewards at all — but gifts. The governing ethos of the "kingdom of heaven" isn't work-and-reward, but rather gift-and-gratitude.

3) But there's something even deeper going on here as well. A work-and-reward mentality could just as easily have led the early-arrivers to demand higher wages for themselves, or to expressly envy the deal the late-arrivers got (less work for the same pay) — but instead, their "grumbling" is pointedly cast in terms of competitive contempt and resentment. *They haven't worked as hard as we have! They don't deserve to be equal with us!* Strictly speaking, they don't "envy" the late-arrivers, since "envy" means wishing to possess something someone else has. Rather, what we have here is the opposite: wishing someone else *didn't* have something you have! Indeed, the early-arrivers are neither "envious" nor obsessed with "fairness"; they're scornful. They've judged the late-arrivers to be less worthy, and they resent the householder's action because it erases that imagined pecking order: "you have made *them* equal to *us*." Put simply, when the early-arrivers look at the late-arrivers, they see a "them" to look down on.

4) The householder, however, will have none of this. The NRSV translates his response as "are you envious?", but the Greek is literally, "is your eye evil?" Jesus uses this "evil eye" idiom one other time in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount: "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy [literally, 'if your eye is evil'], your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:22-23).

5) Thus the problem with the early-arrivers has to do with how they see — or rather, fail to see — the world around them. Where they could and should see a "we," they see an

"us vs. them." Where they could and should feel camaraderie, they feel contempt. Where they could and should see and celebrate a vineyard of God's grace, they see an arena of competition, and a cause for resentment. In short, their "eye is unhealthy." Their whole way of seeing the world is distorted and obscured. Their "lamp of the body" is emitting darkness, not light, and so their "whole body fills with darkness." Even the householder's generosity itself — the very abundance of which early-arrivers, too, are beneficiaries — appears as an occasion for division and scorn, for the invention of a "them" for "us" to look down on. And that kind of clannish divisiveness, of course, is exactly what lies in store for Jesus, just up ahead, on the road to Golgotha.

Takeaways:

1) This parable is a classic case of "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." To listeners who feel unworthy, or unholy, or "on the outside looking in," the parable comes as radiant good news: despite appearances, there is a hidden economy in creation, heaven's economy, based not on righteousness but on grace. The work-and-reward ethos, so dominant in the world as we know it, has no place in the "kingdom of heaven" now dawning on earth. *Be encouraged, for the "last" shall be first!* And by the same token, to those who feel entitled and superior, "holier than thou," or "on the inside looking out," the parable comes as a sharp word of warning: beware the us-and-them arrogance that cuts you off from your brothers and sisters, and ultimately from experiencing God's generosity. Re-light the lamp of your eye; turn your perspective upside-down (or rather, rightside-up!). *Be humbled, for the "first" shall be last!*

2) Jesus' use of the "evil eye" idiom puts a new spin on his declaration, "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). We're called to see creation through the householder's eyes, as a vineyard full of hard work, yes, and at the same time full of God's graceful gifts — and then, once we see in this way, we're called to act accordingly, becoming "lamps" that illumine the world for all to see. Can we see creation in this way, as a garden of God's generosity, despite how things often seem, despite the drumbeats of "scarcity," "threat," and "work-and-reward"?

3) It's easier said than done — and not only because those drumbeats are compelling and familiar, or because the world is so full of loss and suffering, or because our lives (especially these days!) are so besieged by various forms of "us vs. them." Seeing the world as a graceful garden, and acting accordingly, takes profound trust and patience, insight, and imagination. It's just plain difficult; we need each other's help to do it (that's what the church is!), and God's help most of all. But when we do see in this way, when the lamps of our eyes are lit, the wounds of creation begin to heal, little by little. For when we see each other as fellow beneficiaries of God's merciful gifts, equally "un-entitled" and equally beloved, the whole idea of "us vs. them" begins to fall away. The report that "you have made them equal to us" becomes a cause for celebration, not complaint. And what emerges, in the end, is an ever-widening "we": children of God in the image of God, the One who turns the world rightside-up, humbling the "first" and lifting the "last."

People of Cliff Ave UC, whether you are the first or the last or somewhere in between, you have been "hired" by the divine to "work for" the kingdom right here and now.

The kingdom of heaven is like...The place where human entitlement meets divine distribution and a new way of seeing and being breaks forth. Thanks be to God for this WTF!? World turning faith!

Thanks be for the Bible and the stories of Jesus telling us what the kingdom of heaven is like.

And from one labourer to another...let us work together for the kingdom of Heaven on earth right here and now. May it be so

Amen

From Rev Jen