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SERMON: So, the Last Will Be First, and the First Will Be Last.

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Exodus 16:2-15, Matthew 20:1-16

Today we have two seemingly different stories from the Scriptures. However, I submit that there is a common lesson in both stories.

That common lesson is that God's ways are not our ways. God sees the world very differently than we often do, and God reacts to the needs of the people in ways that are very unpredictable ... not necessarily what we might want or expect to happen. The take-away lesson from today's sermon is therefore that we might think more about seeing the world as God sees. We might think more about trying to solve problems with a wider view and with more openness than we often do.

Our first reading from Exodus gives us a picture of the newly freed Hebrew slaves ... safe from Pharaoh's chariots but wandering in the wilderness where there is no obvious source of food or drink. In America most of us are so affluent that we have no idea what it means to be hungry ... I mean, really, hungry!

Maybe you, like I, have been on diets in your life. One of my diets was based on eating three meals per day with regularly scheduled healthy snacks between meals. Quite, reasonable actually. However, I can tell you that early in my dieting days when it got to mid-morning or mid-afternoon, I was hungry. I was so hungry that I felt almost sick ... I needed to have something to eat ... RIGHT NOW! An apple ... a sandwich ... a glass of milk ... SOMETHING!

Now imagine those people wandering in the wilderness ... sun shining down ... air dry as a bone ... nothing but rocks and sand no matter where one looked... almost no shade. And their minds start to work ... I am so hungry! ... have I ever been this hungry?? ... no ... in Egypt we had plenty of meat and bread ... I had to work hard, and I had no freedom, but I was never in danger of starving ... gosh, I remember how my stomach felt after eating ... so full! ... and now, my stomach is empty, and it hurts ... HURTS!

They were a distance from Egypt, from where they had lived in slavery. Maybe 250 miles or so.

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And when they were hungry, what might have seemed far away, all of sudden came closer ... mmm, meat ... mmm, bread ... mmm, Egypt. All they had to do was turn around and go back to Egypt ... go back to all the food that would keep them from ever feeling so very hungry again.

Ironic that the memory of Egypt must have come to seem very close, very near, to where they were far away in the wilderness. Clearly Moses and Aaron had no idea what they were doing ... and this God that had called them out of Egypt into the desert wastes ... he was no help ... the people were hungry!

With or without having been on a diet, I tell you that my sympathies are with the Hebrew people wandering in the desert. Being hungry is no joke ... it is serious. Surely, we can sympathize and understand why they began to grumble and complain.

And just as God had heard the cries of the Hebrew people when they were in slavery and brought Moses to lead them and brought plagues to persuade Pharaoh to free them ... now God again heard the cries of the hungry people ... God heard the people ... God did not wait for Moses to come to him and explain what was going on ... God knew! God heard and he fed the people ... ok, so the bread was a little different but roasted quail is delicious!

And so, stomachs did a turn-around. They moved away from spines and back out toward navels ... the people were fed and were satisfied ... they were full. The people, for the moment, were relieved ... they would not starve to death. They would live!

What about our NT reading from the Gospel according to Matthew? Well, frankly, it is kind of a strange story. Everything seems to up to the judgment of the employer and this employer seems quite generous, maybe even crazy generous! Is the lesson of this narrative that we should rely on the judgment and generosity of employers without question?

No, I don't think so. I think that this is a parable about justice and God, but I don't think that Jesus had in mind a lesson the economics of wages in the labor market. I think that Jesus had in mind the first and last of the ten commandments.

What's the first commandment? You shall have no other gods before me.

What's the last commandment? You shall not covet anything that is your neighbor's.

The workers who were hired first and paid last grumbled that the employer was unfair. Why was it that those who had worked only an hour or so were paid the same denarius paid to those who had worked for twelve hours?

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I gotta tell you ... I have some sympathy for the workers who put a full day!

But Jesus was not trying to deal with labor market issues and fair wage policies. His story was a story about God/Jesus, the employer, and those who committed themselves to the kingdom of heaven, the workers.

Remember, in Jesus the kingdom of heaven had come near. "Kingdom of heaven" is a way of saying the name of God, without actually speaking the holy name of God. Faithful Jews do not normally speak the name of God ... it is too holy to be said aloud.

God had come near in Jesus. The God who might have seemed far away had come near in the person of Jesus.

The grumbling workers were trying to replace God's judgment with their own. Remember ... you shall have no other gods before me. The landowner in this parable represents God or maybe Jesus. Regardless, by questioning God's judgment, the unhappy workers were trying to substitute their judgment, their notions of fairness, for God's judgment.

The workers had agreed on a wage rate for the day, one that was commonly regarded as fair. Only at the end of the day when they saw the employer handing out the same amount of money to latecomers did they begin to think they were treated unfairly.

And that brings us to the last commandment. The unhappy workers coveted the money the employer was paying those hired late in the day. The workers were violating and trying to get around the commandment against coveting the property of their neighbor. It was not their money. It was the employer's money. And the workers who came late needed the money ... they had families to feed. What was it not just, even necessary, that they should receive enough money to feed themselves and their families and live to survive another day?

Remember that Matthew was writing several decades after Jesus died and was resurrected. The original followers of Jesus were Jewish. Later the followers of Jesus began to include Gentiles attracted by the preaching and witness of evangelists like Paul and Titus and Barnabas and Silas and so many others.

And yet the reward to the original Jewish believers and the later Gentile latecomers was the same, as it is for us. The reward is the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God ... a renewed and restored heaven and earth without sickness or war or poverty. Matthew wrote this parable of Jesus' as a way of dealing with Jewish believers who had put in many years of service and were

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unhappy. Indeed, this parable in Matthew comes immediately after and as a answer to Jesus' disciples who asked Jesus what was in all this hardship and difficult life for them.

Just as God heard the grumbling Hebrew wandering in the wilderness, so also does Jesus hear his disciples and the grumbling workers in the parable. Jesus insists on God's sovereignty. It is not up to the unhappy and covetous workers to demand that they get a bigger reward than those, like us, who came later. That is not their prerogative nor is it the covenant God offers. God is God, and we are not God! So much for trying to get around the first commandment.

As for covetousness ... well, in the Kingdom of God, everyone is fed, healthy, and filled with the joy that comes with full realization of the love of God and love of neighbor. There is no covetousness because no one has a greater portion of health or joy than anyone else. Joy overcomes the workers' and the disciples attempt to find a way around the final commandment.

Jesus' parable recognizes not only the immediate need of the workers but shows that Jesus understands the systems that resulted in those workers standing around looking for work. The employer understood the immediate need of the worker. The employer also knew why they were out of work in the first place. God wants to be similarly aware of the immediate needs of our neighbor the underlying causes for those needs. God wants us to work on solving both problems.

Just as with those long-ago Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, we have no reason to complain about the covenant God offers. We voluntarily enter into the covenant ... it is fair and just to all of the followers of God. Nor do we have any reason to covet. In the fully realized Kingdom of Heaven, there will be no reason to covet and every reason to praise and thank our God. But in the interim, we do need to be about the work of moving our human society in the direction of that heavenly Kingdom.

We are going to rise in just a minute and sing that beautiful old hymn, I Am Thine, O Lord. It is a song about near coming close to far, about those of us who are far from God to be drawn nearer, to be closer to, God. Pay attention to the lyrics: "I long to the rise in the arms of faith and be closer drawn to Thee."

We often have moments in our own lives when we think we are not being recognized and rewarded for the value of our efforts and our lives. God hears. God knows. God has come near in the person of Jesus and is present with us today, here in this place, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We need not try to put ourselves into the place of God and try to save and heal ourselves ... only God can do that ... and God stands ready to do exactly that.

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Our last hymn sings about the possibility of an intimate relationship with our Savior. In the words of our final hymn, “O, the pure delight of a single hour that before Thy throne I spend, when I kneel in prayer, and with Thee, my, I commune as friend with friend!” Friend in communion with friend ... now that is a vision that will sustain us indeed!

Amen.