

“Committing to Stand by the Side of the Road” by Anna Gilcher

“Committing to Stand by the Side of the Road” by Anna Gilcher given at St. Stephen & the Incarnation Episcopal Church, Washington, DC

Anna
Gilcher

Year A, Proper 20 (RCL)

September 18, 2005 *Exodus 16:2-5*

Sermon for St. Stephen & the Incarnation
Psalm

105:1-6;37-45

Episcopal Church, Washington, DC *Philippians 1:20-30*

Matthew 20:1-16

Committing to Stand by the Side of the Road

As Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians: May Christ be exalted in all our bodies, whether by living or by dying.

Amen.

Well, here we are again, with another story about money and what we feel we deserve. Last week we heard the parable about the slave who owes his master 10,000 talents and has his debt forgiven, only to demand payment of a hundred denarii from a fellow slave. Despite the incredible generosity shown him, he is unwilling to have patience or to forgive that much smaller debt. Linda pointed out in her excellent sermon that the difference in debt can be rendered in the gold standard as the difference between something like \$5300 and \$3.2 *trillion*. Apparently, this slave feels he's owed **both** the forgiveness of his huge debt *and* the repayment of what the other slave owes him. Linda suggested we think of these numbers in terms of global economics: in this way our country, just 5% of the world's population but the consumer of 25% of its oil, is clearly akin to the "wicked" slave, owing much beyond what we could ever hope to repay and yet mercilessly demanding payment from others who owe only a fraction of that amount.

This week Jesus offers us another parable: *Here's an image for what the kingdom of heaven is like*, he says. It's like a landowner who goes out at the beginning of the day and invites workers to work in his vineyard, promising to pay them a denarius, which is the usual daily wage; and then goes back out and invites others at 9:00 and at 12 and more still at 3 and at 5 (the 11th hour). He promises to pay the ones he invites at 9 and 12 and 3 "what is right," and doesn't even mention payment to the ones he invites to work at 5. When the time comes for them to be paid, he instructs his manager to pay the last first, and to pay all the workers that one denarius. Those hired at 5:00 are amazed and thrilled—a whole day's wage for one hour's work! As he goes through the line, however, the grumbling grows stronger, until those who'd been

working since 6:00 that morning are given their denarius, and they complain loudly: "What's all this about? it isn't fair! How come you paid them as much as us, when we're the ones who did almost all the work??"

If the ones who worked one hour got one denarius, then you owe us... let's see... 12!

But, friend, the owner says, we agreed on the usual daily wage. If I choose to pay the others the same, that is not hurting you. "Or is your eye evil," the Greek reads, "because I am generous?"

Jesus ends the parable saying: So the last will be first and the first will be last.

"Gospel" means "good news." I wonder, is this parable good news for us?

If things are turned on their head and the last are first while the first are last, where does that put us-following up on Linda's sermon-as a nation? How about as a church? as individuals?

And what about racially? Economically?

It probably sounds like better news to some in this room than to others. Our first reaction to this parable probably depends a lot on where we see ourselves in the line.

Is what happens in the parable fair? And if it's not fair, can it really be about the way God is? Because if even *God* isn't fair, then who can we count on?

But what if our obsession with *what's fair* doesn't have a lot to do with what the kingdom of God is like? What if God is actually inviting us into freedom from all of that?

The American dream is all about working hard and being rewarded for that work. Getting what we deserve. Being in

control of our own destinies. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We know, of course, that there's a lot in that dream that doesn't work. The pictures and stories of those who were left behind in New Orleans when the hurricane hit certainly have certainly shown us-and the world at large-that it doesn't work for everyone. Living in this city we see-and some of us experience-that every day. There's a whisper in us, though-isn't there?-that perhaps those for whom it doesn't work must be doing something wrong; they don't know how to go about it right; and maybe, just maybe, they're being a tad bit idle.

Idle. That's the word that's used to describe the workers the landowner hires. They're standing around idle... But, notice, **it is because of their very idleness that they are *available* for the invitation to work in the vineyard.** Being idle doesn't have a very good rap in our culture. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." So: keep busy.

What if we keep so busy that we're not able to hear the invitation to work in the vineyard, though? What, then?

In a sermon written and delivered in October 2001, David Lloyd of Seekers Church here in DC (the other church I attend) [points out](#) that "the concept of powerlessness is un-American. Part of the American myth... is that we control our lives and destinies. It has never been true, but at some level as Americans we really believe it to be true, and what's more we believe that as Americans we are **entitled** to feel in control of our lives." The attacks of September 11 of that year shook that myth to its core; as has the devastation of hurricane Katrina. So we felt and feel powerless. But we cannot bear to feel powerless. "We are Americans and Americans are not powerless!," David writes. "We **face** problems, we roll up our sleeves and we **tackle** problems." He then asks an important and challenging question:

When we do something in response to crisis are we acting out

of faith, even faith as small as a mustard seed, which can move mountains? If so, let us rejoice and commit to faithfulness in carrying out that vision. Alternatively, are we doing something primarily because we cannot bear to feel powerless? If we cannot bear to give up the illusion that we control our lives, if we cannot bear to feel that we are dependent on God's love, then our first... task is to embrace our powerlessness. If I see inside myself the temptation to seek power because I fear being powerless, then I need to commit to stand by the side of the road calling out [like the lepers in Luke's gospel]: "Jesus, Master, take pity on me."

If I see inside myself the temptation to seek power because I fear being powerless, then I need to commit to stand by the side of the road calling out, "Jesus, Master, take pity on me."

Do I need to commit to being... idle?

Are we able to embrace our own powerlessness and surrender ourselves to the One who loves us and invites us to participate in the work in the Vineyard? Or are we so busy making ourselves feel better-more useful-more powerful-more capable-less guilty (fill in the blank) that we either don't hear the call to work, or, once we're there, only notice what doesn't seem fair in our little system of accounting?

Paul J. Nuechterlein, a Lutheran pastor whose lectionary website I often visit, comments on the American myth of our own power and getting what we deserve:

...Well, God came to save us from all that. God doesn't give us what we deserve. That would be the death we multiply greatly through all our ministrations of "justice." No, God doesn't give us what we deserve. Out of sheer grace, God gives us life. Out of the overflowing divine love, God gives us an abundant new life. And God gives this to us precisely by inviting us out of our sense of fairness. This new life isn't

just something that happens when we die, it's something that can begin to happen now, as we die to our old sense of fairness and rise to living in God's grace.

Think about it. This is not easy, folks! It's tough to give up this sense of fairness and justice that dictates everything around us. What's the American dream? To work hard and get what you deserve, right? But that's what we're talking about here. God sent Jesus to save us from that. For what does that get us? ... Does all this keeping up with the Joneses make us content? Or does it weigh us down with a load of resentment, a load of debts we keep with one another, and then comes the anger, or depression, and, eventually, even violence. We strike out and hurt someone else. Not always with our fist or a weapon, harming them physically. But also with our words and with our actions, harming them emotionally, spiritually...

No, God came to save us from this by offering us a new way to live, a whole new world to live in, the world of gracious forgiveness, a world free of debt. It's not what we deserve, but through Jesus Christ it is what we get. It is what God offers us... We don't get what we deserve. What we do get is a fulfilling new life of serving God and serving one another. We get a life of joyfully sharing God's grace with others.[1]

At the end of the day, when it comes time for our "pay," we will line up, stretch out our hands, and find we have each been given the same daily wage: one human life. No more no less.

I pray that I, for one, will have touched by then the freedom and joy that are in the loving, repeated invitation and in the work itself-for in these, it seems clear, lies the reward.

Amen.

[1]

http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper20a_1996_ser.htm