

Sermon on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
St. James Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California
September 23, 2007
By The Rev. Mary Moore Gaines

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

In the Gospel this morning, the owner of the vineyard tells the early morning workers, *Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the 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?*
Matthew 20:14-15.

This parable of the vineyard laborers, described by a renowned biblical scholar as "one of the greatest and most glorious of all," is found only in Matthew and is identified as one of the five that Jesus himself almost certainly told in the midst of his earthly ministry. In telling this parable, Jesus tells us a lot about himself.

Like all the parables, this one has many layers of meaning and of interpretation. This is what makes parables durable, provocative and attractive. They pull us deeper. For instance, at one level, this parable describes life as it was in Palestine in Jesus' time, especially at the time of the grape harvest near the end of September. When the grapes are ripe there is a frantic race to get them picked before the rains come. The marketplace is the labor exchange. Any worker is welcome. The men are hired laborers, the lowest class of workers. Even slaves and servants have the advantage being attached to an extended family. Day laborers do not. Their lives are always the most precarious.

This vineyard owner comes to the marketplace early in the morning and hires all the workers he can find. These workers go immediately into the vineyard and begin to pick the grapes. The owner returns to the marketplace several times that day, at midday and even in the late afternoon and hires more workers. At the end of the day, the vineyard owner pays a full wage, the same amount to those who started early and worked all day and to those who came late and worked only a few hours.

The full day workers begin to complain that this just isn't fair. Whereupon the vineyard owner says to them, *Take what belongs to*

you and go; I choose to give to the 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?

Go deeper and reflect for a moment on whom Jesus may have been telling this parable to and what he wants to get across to them. In one sense, the parable is an admonition to the first disciples, "You have received the precious gift of entering the fellowship very early, but you must not claim special treatment when others come in later. No matter when we come, we are all equally precious to God."

Jesus may very well have been speaking to our patron James and his brother John, among the first disciples, the 'sons of thunder,' whom, you remember, are continually trying to negotiate special places of honor in the kingdom even as Jesus keeps telling them that he will be condemned to death, spat upon, flogged and killed.

In another sense, Jesus, a Jew, is speaking to his fellow Jews. "Even though you see yourselves as the chosen people of God, you must not look down on the Gentiles. When Gentiles come into our fellowship, we must welcome them as equals. No matter who we are, we are all equally precious to God."

These original interpretations are valid today. No matter when we come or who we are, we are all equally precious to God.

Now widen the lens to include the passion of Jesus, his suffering and death and his resurrection and to include ourselves. What is Jesus saying to us two thousand years later? The juxtaposition of Jesus, who is the incarnation of the radical generosity of God, and the whining vineyard workers, who want to be sure no one gets any more than they do, couldn't be more explicit. In short, we, all of us, are called to recognize and respond to the radical generosity of God.

The question Jesus challenges us to ask ourselves is, "How do I get in touch with the radical generosity of God in my own life and become radically generous myself?" Here is a true story about someone who is in touch with and lives that radical generosity.

Lori Lamma, a young woman member of St. James, organist, carillon player, composer, sexton of Grace Cathedral and horsewoman donated one of her kidneys to a young woman named Jackie Cherry, a registered nurse, whose kidneys had failed. Jackie and Lori are not related. They are "just" friends. It is a fact that non-related live

donors are extremely rare. Why did Lori donate one of her kidneys to Jackie? The doctors wondered too. However, Lori passed all the tests including the interview with the hospital psychiatrist who examined her closely, looking for problems with her motives. At the end of the examination his report said simply, "Her action is rational and entirely consistent with her religious beliefs." That may qualify as the understatement of the century!

As the day of the operation came near, Lori was scared and, at the same time, she talked with excitement about the gifts she herself had already been given in the process and about the future. About how to express more fully what she heard as the graceful invitation of the Gospel to offer this healing gift of herself to her friend. Radical generosity in action.

The night before the operation there was a healing service here at St. James with laying on of hands. The Church was packed. The Head of Surgery at the hospital, the doctors who would perform the operation, the nurses who would attend. A hospital social worker. A prominent theologian. Friends and colleagues from work. Church members. The Bishop and the Executive Officer of the diocese.

The operation was a success and both Lori and Jackie recovered well. That was nearly twelve years ago. Today Lori, now a San Francisco police officer, and Jackie both continue to thrive. The fruits of Lori's response to, and Jackie's acceptance of, the radical generosity of God continue to resonate in our congregation, in the diocese, the medical community and the whole city of San Francisco.

Where in your life are the possibilities for radical generosity? Sometimes seeing the possibilities is even more difficult than responding, so blinkered are we by our own version of "reality." So mired are we in the conventional wisdom of the culture. Jesus was a teacher of unconventional wisdom. Exciting, provocative and challenging.

Look around you. Promise yourself that this week you will see a possibility and respond with an act of radical generosity. Think about what you did afterward and about how you felt. Tell someone about it. Get in touch with the blessed cycle of giving and receiving. Of receiving and giving. It works both ways. This cycle resembles powerfully the natural cycle of birth, death and re-birth.

Don't keep score. Remember the vineyard owner who paid the

workers who began work in the last hour the same as he paid those who started in the first hour. Remember the prodigal son whom his father loved as much as he loved the son who had never gone astray. Remember the abundance of creation, the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin. Remember, the radical generosity of God who bears us up on eagle's wings, who holds us in the palm of Her hand. Remember Jesus Christ who gave his life so that we might have life and have it abundantly. He is risen . . . and so are we.