

“God wants you”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
March 17, 2019

Matthew 20:1-16

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Christmas trees piled high on a truck; a pale white moon that haunted sleep; a medic running away from battle—these were Roger Ezell’s recurring dreams. For several months he had unfolded his story, adding a few more details with each retelling.

Ezell endured years of tortured sleep before coming to understand his dreams.

The trees were black body bags on a truck in Vietnam. The moon was the face of his first fatality. He was the medic—except in reality he had been decorated twice for valor while running into, not away from, a firefight in Vietnam.

After his discharge, he earned a master of fine arts in music, but his teaching career ended when he blew up in class and threw a music stand.

He had always been active in church and had always found school to be a safe place, so he went to seminary. He served congregations in Missouri and Minnesota but exhibited more symptoms.¹

It wasn’t until Ezell was diagnosed with PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, that he got the help he needed. For years, he felt unwanted. By the schools that wanted nothing to do with the teacher with an anger problem. By the churches that didn’t understand PTSD. By the people who didn’t listen. Over and over again, the world told Ezell that it didn’t want him.

How many times has the world said the same thing to us? How many times has the world said to us, “We don’t want your depression or disability, don’t want your anger or need, don’t want your divorce or loud children, don’t want your mistakes or hurts, don’t want your doubts or questions, don’t want your convoluted spiritual journey”?

How many times had the disciples heard this? Poor fishermen and day laborers, tax collectors and women, the members of a disenfranchised religion and the citizens of a conquered nation, the kind of people overlooked, avoided, deemed disposable, invisible.

These were the people Jesus called as his disciples. These were the people Jesus said God wanted.

I think Jesus hoped that they would draw from their experience a humble commitment to inclusion. Instead, they bickered about who was the greatest. Instead, they contended for the

¹ Bebe Baldwin and Lisa Larges, “Journeys toward inclusion,” *Presbyterians Today*, Nov 2014.

superior place, doubting the value of those who came later. Instead, they built a church that ever is debating who's in and who's out, who Christ died for and who's too late, too Gentile, too Jewish, too sinful, too different.

Jesus looks at these people, his friends, who had been shut out for so long and yet who are quick to slam the door on others, and he's concerned that they still don't get it.

So Jesus tells them a story, a parable. It's the last parable he tells them before he enters Jerusalem in the Gospel of Matthew, the last parable before he begins his walk to the cross.

It's a familiar story for his listeners. These fields and hills of Palestine were once small family farms, not much, but enough to live on. But during the Roman occupation, the elite bought up these farms and converted them into massive vineyards, because wine was more profitable than grain. Strangled by debt, the farmers were forced to become day laborers, working long, hard days for minimum pay on land that used to be theirs.

In Jesus' story, these workers have gathered early in the marketplace, desperate for the subsistence wage that would determine whether their children would eat that day or not. Some are picked early. Some are picked midday. Some are not picked until the last hour.

When the landowner asks the last why they've been standing idle all day, they answer, "Because no one has hired us."

They weren't lazy; they stood idle because no one wanted them. Every worker in that vineyard, whether early or late, started in the same place—standing on a lonely corner, unsure whether they'd survive the day, unsure whether anyone cared.

Who do you think stands there still on that corner, waiting? The LGBTQ teen kicked out of their home; the migrant worker. Maybe the kid who's being bullied at school, or the person who's messed up so many times they don't think church is for them, or the addict who keeps relapsing. Perhaps it's the person convinced they're not enough for God—not good enough, not religious enough, not strong enough. It might be a veteran like Roger Ezell, who found healing but all too late for the schools and churches that won't hire him. Or maybe it's you. Maybe me.

The good news? The vineyard owner calls all of them, every one of them. He pays the same wage to each man. He even pays the late-comers first.

Once we get past the frustrating unfairness of it all, we like this story and its message of grace. But do we understand it?

Many say this is an allegory. The vineyard owner is God; we are the workers; and the pay is the unearned grace of God. Those hired first are perhaps the Pharisees, or the disciples, or anyone who thinks they deserve special privilege because they've earned it. The latecomers are outcasts or Gentiles or subsequent generations of Christians or anyone who is late to the faith.

There is undoubtedly truth to this interpretation. But recently, scholars have been asking: Would Jesus, who is constantly teaching about wealth and poverty, really have overlooked the fact that he's told a story rooted in the exploitation and displacement of his own people? Would he really have compared God to a vicious monopolist whose greed violated the Torah? Would he have compared God's grace—the sacrifice of his own life—to a single denarius, which did nothing to change that person's circumstances or impart hope?

The thing about parables is that they are like seashells; they've got this hard outer shell, this obvious meaning, and then inside there's what the author Anthony Doerr calls “the sculpture of calcium... ramps, spines, beads, whorls, folds,” a downward spiral of increasingly subtle meaning. Because they have layers, parables can mean more than one thing.

On one level, this is a simple parable about grace. On another, it's a story about the injustice and suffering of the world, contrasted with the kingdom of God. On another, it's a lesson about God's persistence that leads to the cross.

Jesus starts this parable by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner...” He doesn't say, “The kingdom of heaven *is* a landowner.” He says *like*, which implies both similarities and differences.

Jesus' audience would have immediately intuited the intentions of this vineyard owner. It was harvest season, rains were coming; if the grapes weren't harvested in time, they'd be ruined; the landowner needed every worker he could get. His motivation was self-interest.

Perhaps, Jesus is saying that if even this corrupt guy can see how it's beneficial to welcome all laborers, how much more so will our good and gracious God welcome all and give them a wage, not for one day, but for all eternity.

Anywhere we wait, God shows up—just like this vineyard owner. And God keeps showing up, keeps saying, “I want you, I want you,” until we believe it, until we leave that marketplace and follow, until all are gathered in the field, alive and fed. But unlike the vineyard owner, God shows up for our sake. And instead of a meager day's wages, God gives us God's very own life in the person of Jesus Christ.

It's in this way that God takes all the painful, messed-up stuff in our lives, all the stuff intended for our harm, and turns it on its head, using it instead to save us.

The disciples needed to hear this, because this is what God was about to do with the cross—an evil thing designed for oppression, for death, for the defeat of God, much like that vineyard—and God's going to turn it around, and use it for grace, for the victory of God's love. God's going to use it for you.

The disciples needed to hear this, because they would be tempted to turn it back around, to set the vineyard (or the cross) aright and make it more like the world again, with its hierarchies, its in and outs, its people unwanted, its people too late.

This parable told them, and it tells us, that Christ went to the cross for everyone, not just the early risers and the righteous, not just the popular and the powerful. He went as one of the least of these, an unwanted crucified beside the unwanted, so that the least of these, the last of these, would be welcomed.

William Barclay writes, “No matter when people enter the kingdom—late or soon, in the first flush of youth, in the strength of middle age, or when the shadows are lengthening—they are equally dear to God.”

No matter when you show up, no matter who you are, no matter what you’ve done, God wants you. God’s going to take all the vineyards in your life, all the things that have made you feel unwanted and unworthy, all the things that have deprived you of life and purpose, and God’s going to turn it around; God’s going to use it to save you, to uproot injustice, to seed life, to say, “I want you.” **Amen.**