

'Wilderness wanderings' Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2008

Last Tuesday evening I arrived 20 minutes early for my rehearsal of Key Chorale down in Sarasota. There was a short line near the door of the fellowship-hall where we rehearse. I was told this was for picking up our music for the season. As I had already picked up my music the previous week I simply entered the room and did not stand in line. But, some ten minutes later, I discovered that at the same table as the music list was a sheet for signing up for buses to take us to a rehearsal and subsequent concert down in Fort Myers next month. This I needed to do. So I had to go to the back of the line, by this time a much longer line than when I had arrived. Now this didn't really matter. After all, there was still plenty of time and it's not as if I was standing waiting in drenching rain or hot sun. But I was conscious that although I'd been among the first to arrive for the rehearsal I was among the last to sign the necessary sheet and I was a bit annoyed with myself for not making entirely certain what the line was for when I first arrived.

Just look at these words on the front of your bulletin. We're real familiar with them, but do you really like them? Are you happy with the principle that 'the last will be first, and the first will be last'? Imagine you're first in line at the supermarket check-out. You've been waiting quite some time to get to that point and suddenly you're sent to the back – not because you've forgotten something but because suddenly they've changed the rules and declare 'the last will be first, and the first will be last.' This is fine, of course, if you're the last in line. None of us complains at being moved forward. But what if you're the first in line and you suddenly become the last? Yet, Jesus says this is how it is in God's kingdom. This saying: 'the last will be first, and the first will be last' comes a number of times in the gospel of Matthew from which our scriptures have come in recent Sundays. It comes immediately before the parable about the Kingdom of heaven that I've just read and it comes at the end of the parable. Indeed, it is the final point of the parable, as Jesus concludes: 'So, the last will be first, and the first will be last.' Why is this such an important principle and what does it and, indeed, the whole parable, teach us about how we should live as Christians? It teaches us that we are entirely dependent on God's grace, but lets try and spell this out in a way that can help us be Christ's disciples.

First of all, we have to realize that God does not owe us anything. Do we really believe this, I wonder. It is all too easy subconsciously to believe that God somehow is in our debt. Doesn't he know what our discipleship costs us? Doesn't he know what we've given up for him, what time and energy we've put in for his work? Doesn't he know that all this Christian living does not come naturally to us. It requires great effort, trying to follow Jesus. I ask you to put yourselves in the place of Jesus' first disciples, the twelve tramping round the Galilean countryside after an itinerant teacher and healer. Those who come for help are not always the people you'd choose to spend your time with; after all, as Jesus himself said, it's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. We've noticed a few times in our worship in recent weeks that it is Peter who is honest enough to voice what Jesus' disciples are thinking. And so it is with this morning's gospel reading. Jesus doesn't suddenly launch into his story about the laborers in the

vineyard with no prompting. Rather his parable is prompted by a particular situation. At the end of chapter 19 of Matthew's gospel, we read that Peter says to Jesus: 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?' Notice the way Peter begins this question. 'Look', 'See here, Jesus'. Are you paying attention, Jesus to how hard this way of life is for us? What's in it for us?

At first Jesus' reply seems comforting: he says that everyone who has followed him and given up security and possessions for his sake 'will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.' That's great, you can hear Peter saying. That's great we think. But then Jesus has to go and spoil it by coming out with this saying again: 'But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.' Oh dear. That's not fair. And it is against this backdrop of a grudging attitude to service that Jesus tells this parable. This parable illustrates this saying, beginning. 'For, the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.' And just in case anyone misses the point, the parable closes with a somewhat stronger version of the same saying, precisely as printed on our bulletin. And the parable itself is rather offensive not only to Peter and the other early disciples but also to us, I suspect. Indeed, Jesus tells it deliberately to shock us all into thinking that God's kingdom, both now and in the future, is utterly unlike the kingdoms of this world. Let's think about this.

The kingdoms of this world are based on a keen conviction of what we rightly have coming to us. Money and rewards for prudence have been very much in people's minds this week, as people have got something of a shock at the thought that they have somehow been cheated out of their savings. Now imagine that Jesus is currently running for President of the United States and during his campaign he comes out with this parable about the laborers in the vineyard, where those who have been hired late in the day get paid a full day's wage. He says that some people will grumble about this but he concludes with the reminder that as the employer he should be allowed to do what he chooses with what belongs to him. And then he concludes: 'So the last will be first, and the first will be last. I am Jesus Christ and I approve this message.' What uproar would ensue? That would be the end of his campaign. If that's how he runs his business, and that's how he intends to run the country then he clearly is going to bankrupt not only Lehman Brothers but the entire world.

But Jesus isn't running for political office. He is not trying to run any kingdom of this world. As such, he is not talking about fiscal or employment policy. He is simply not interested in performance-related pay. He is talking about God, the ruler of all and of his abundant love. There are absolutely no limits to this love. So you can never bankrupt God. Jesus is no expert on finance but he is an expert on God and his love. And this is why he keeps on saying to those who treat God like an employer who owes them money or goods or a happy life: 'The last will be first, and the first will be last.' Did you notice what Jesus says to those who grumbled about God's extravagance to those who had earned comparatively little? 'Are you envious because I am generous?' What a challenging question! When they receive their pay, their dissatisfaction is such a give-away of their attitudes. As the landowner reminds them, they have received a fair day's wage. They have all that they were expecting and all that they need. What they are

grumbling about is what the landowner gives the other laborers, those with the same need for a wage with which to provide for their family. When we make calculations with God, we are behaving like these resentful laborers. Instead of being glad of God's generosity to others we judge less worthy than ourselves, we resent it. We calculate that we are worth more. We are viewing God as an employer who gives according to earnings not as a gracious Father who provides according to the need of each. Because no one can earn God's grace, a greater quantity of activity does not earn more of it. We, who claim to belong to God's kingdom today, must accept that God, and not us, will decide how those whom we consider 'good' and those whom we consider 'less good' or even 'bad' will be rewarded.

Jesus is surely challenging Peter and he is challenging us about our whole motivation for following him. If it's for reward in the world's terms then you might as well forget it, suggests Jesus. You may well be first in line in terms of all that you've given up to come with me, but you're going to be last in line: precisely because you haven't grasped the essentials of God's kingdom, that God's rule turns our calculations upside down. But life is so unfair, we cry. Yes, it is. And, says Jesus, God's treatment of us, of all of us is not fair. It is more than fair. It is based not on our deserving but on his love.

What about those grumbling in the wilderness in our Exodus scripture this morning? What are they complaining about? It's surely OK to complain, to cry out to whoever is listening. If I'd escaped slavery in Egypt only to find myself starving to death in the wilderness, I'm sure I'd complain. It's OK for me returning from this worship service to a comfortable house, with all amenities and food to eat, but what if I were living in Haiti, or Cuba, or Texas and my house has been blown away? It's surely not the complaining itself that is wrong. After all, the Book of Psalms is full of complaints to God. Small wonder the hungry and frightened people in the wilderness complain. And did you notice that God appears to understand? God's words to Moses are not harsh. Instead God swiftly and lovingly responds to the people's legitimate need for food and so richly provides them with quail and manna. But not before they learn the most enormous lesson. It comes in verse 10 of the Exodus chapter we heard this morning: 'And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud'. They saw God in the wilderness and in their need. They found him before they received their physical nourishment. They didn't bargain with him, not at this point anyway. They didn't say: 'We'll believe in you and keep following Moses if you give us what we deserve, what you owe us.' They had to trust in the reality of God and acknowledge their complete dependence on him. Moses has said to them earlier: 'Your complaining is not against us but against the Lord.' (Ex.16:8). The people had somehow to turn their idea of the kingdom of God on its head. 'Deep down, perhaps most people wish the kingdom of God were, already in this life, like some kind of Disney-ized Magic Kingdom. We wish the kingdom were a place where the streets were always clean where trash was always swept out of sight, and where nightfall would mean only the whole place would light up with twinkling lights. But it's not that way. Even for those who know and accept the good news of the gospel, there can still be the wasteland of depression and the scorching sand of cancer. Like the people who passed safely through the waters of the Red Sea, so

also we plunge into the death of Jesus through the waters of our baptisms, but even still we find various desertlike experiences on the other side. That is the bad news of a reality-inclusive faith. The good news is that the presence of such wilderness times does not nullify the presence of God. As in Exodus 16:10, it is possible to peer into the wilderness and see the glory of the Lord.’<sup>1</sup> This is the reward Jesus promises us: God’s presence and God’s grace. Every single one of us needs this and it is not for us to argue with God about our position in line in terms of how many hours of faithful service we have put in to earn it. God’s gracious presence simply is not earnable.

Let’s just double back for one last minute to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Why couldn’t Jesus have just told a parable about those who had worked all day being paid the standard day’s wage first and being sent away, full satisfied with what they had earned – enough to live on? And then tell us that those who had had to wait around all day to be hired were delighted when the generous landowner paid them a full wage? ‘Many of us could find it in our hearts to be grateful for the generosity of the God who gives the least and the last barely enough. Why, instead of making that perfectly pleasing point, did he have to go on not only to show everyone getting the same amount, but also to depict the master handing out the day’s wages in reverse order, positively setting up those hired early to presume that, since the last hired got a full denarius, the first would surely get proportionately more? Yes, the master addressed one of the grumblers kindly, as ‘Friend,’ before asserting his freedom to do as he wished with his own goods. And he reminded the man that he had not received any less than he had agreed to: grace is more, not less, than justice. But had Jesus not wanted to show something about sin- envy, presumption, resentment – as well as about grace, all he would have had to do was have the master pay the early workers their denarius first and send them away.

“Is your eye evil because I am good?” the master said. That is, are you envious? Envy presupposes the thought that one has somehow been badly or unfairly treated. Someone else has gotten away with something, or someone has somehow received a better deal than one got oneself. The idea further presumes that one has grounds on which one can stand to make a claim- an idea inimical to the fundamental character of grace. Grace is not grace if it is qualified by superior virtue in the recipient. Sinners are not sinners if some of them are less completely dependent on grace than others. Besides, if one has enough oneself, why would one even *want* more than someone else, unless out of some sort of pride and self-righteousness? That it seems so odd to put the question that way – so normal, so natural, is our desire to want more – shows the depth of our sin. The more we insist on our tit-for-tat way of thinking, the more baffled and angry we will be at God’s whole way of dealing with us.<sup>2</sup> Instead, as they hymn-writer urges us: ‘If our love were but more simple, we should rest upon God’s word; and our lives would be illumined by the presence of our Lord.’

And so we sing our closing hymn # 121: ‘There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy’

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<sup>1</sup>Scott Hoezee in Roger E van Harn, edit, *The Lectionary Commentary, vol.1*, Eerdmans 2001, p.94

<sup>2</sup> Marguerite Shuster in Roger E van Harn edit *The Lectionary Commentary vol.3*, Eerdmans, 2001, pp113-114