

IT SHOULDN'T BE THAT HARD

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 24, 2017

Lectionary Readings: Matthew 20:1-16 and Jonah 3:1-10.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Laborers in the Vineyard: One of the Most Difficult Parables

Happy autumn to everyone. Even though it feels like a summer day, this is one of my favorite seasons. Before I get into this sermon, I need to note that now and then, people take issue with a sermon, so let me say right off the bat that this will be one of them. You don't need to talk to me afterward about how wrong I am. I already know.

Okay, we've had two scriptural passages, both of them difficult. The second one, Jonah 3, I'm not really sure how to interpret that. It feels to me like a joke written by the Hebrew sages of old. Nineveh was one of the most brutal and hated countries of the ancient Near East. Of all the countries of that region, Nineveh was the most despised, the least trusted, the most brutal of them all. And so for them to write this story about Jonah, and all he has to do is to walk into the city and say, "Repent," and suddenly they do. I think that the Hebrew sages were trying to make a point about the grace of God.

Moving over to the other one, Matthew 20, the tale of the laborers in the vineyard, this is considered one of the hard ones. There's a handful of pretty difficult passages of the sayings of Jesus, and this is on the short list of the hard ones.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, that's pretty much not a problem for people. They sort of understand what the message of the parable is. You get it right from the get-go. The story of the Prodigal Son, the same thing. Not a problem; we understand it. The Pearl of Great Price; yes, that's an easy one to understand. The parable of the Sower; the word of God being cast around like seed upon different types of ground; yes, we get it. The Lost Sheep; no problem.

It's not Difficult at All; It's That We Just Dislike It; We Disagree

But then there's this one! The Laborers in the Vineyard. Well, let me say from the beginning what my theme, my point is on this sermon. As a matter of fact, after this next sentence, you can nod off if you want. All the rest of it is just commentary. My point on this one is that actually it's *not* difficult at all. It's just that we disagree. We don't like what it says. We understand perfectly well what it says. We just don't like it, and therefore we disagree.

So what exactly is Jesus saying about the Laborers in the Vineyard, anyway? Well, not to put too fine a point on it, it is saying that *all* are rewarded! The late and the early. I would suggest to you that the lateness and the earliness of those laborers is symbolic of the

breadth of humanity. You've got the righteous and the unrighteous. You have the good and the evil. You've got the wise and the foolish, the breadth of humanity. This parable is making a bold, universalist statement, which has been at odds with Christian doctrine for two millennia.

This radical equality is actually offensive to us. And it's offensive because we've got this really old legacy that's sort of like hard-wired into us that we believe not in the radical equality of human beings but rather we believe in what might be called sin management. And so you have this default position that everybody's a sinner, and we need to figure out what are the big sins, what are the little sins, and dole out punishment appropriate to the sins, and keep humanity in check that way.

For example, suppose somebody lied. For centuries within the church, it's like two Hail Marys, three Our Fathers, and you've got it covered.

I'm going to make a joke about this next one, but there's a measure of truth to it. We had a problem with a number of toilets here in the rest of the building. They were leaking, they would run, we were wasting water. They were the kind that used too much water to begin with. So we replaced a lot of the toilets. Clare Price was the one who did the work for us, and unknown to the rest of you, I knocked twenty years off his time in purgatory because of all the good jobs that he did.

But actually we secretly agree with those disgruntled laborers! Do we not? We can hardly fathom that God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's reward would be that total.

Two Imperfect Examples of the Ways of Total Forgiveness

But actually, I'm going to give you two imperfect examples — two incomplete, good enough but not the best examples of the ways in which we have a sense of what total forgiveness might be like. One of them is on a longer time frame. One is on a shorter time frame.

This last summer, on July 4, how many of you spent even one minute being upset with the British? The Spanish-American war was in 1898. Have any of you been upset with the Spaniards lately? And then, in the middle of the previous century was the big one, World War II. And yet, in 2011, in the final international women's soccer tournament, it was the United States versus Japan, hosted by Germany; 2011 versus the 1940's. We do have a sense of letting time heal old wounds, a sense of forgiveness that is total.

The second example is about children, either yours or somebody else's. How many times growing up does a child not tell the truth, but tells a fib? How many times growing up is a child disrespectful, gets mouthy with you, not showing proper respect? How many times does a child get into some kind of altercation with a sibling, either verbal or physical? Of course, the answer is hundreds of times per kid.

How many of those incidents can you actually remember? You know they happened. You know they happened by the dozens or the hundreds, but how many individual incidents can you actually remember? I'll bet it's vanishingly small. You'll try very hard, and maybe come up with one. We have forgotten 99 percent of them because they were just children, and what's the point of remembering that kind of stuff anyway? Rather, our parental forgiveness is why we think of God as parental because we get it, what it's like

raising children. We have a knowledge, a feeling for what total forgiveness is really like. But we have trouble believing it, and Jesus was telling a story to others who had the same trouble.

The Importance of Believing in God's Total Forgiveness

It is important, exceedingly important, to believe in God's total forgiveness! I'll tell you why in a moment.

When I came across this passage, this was the lectionary passage for this Sunday. Normally, I don't follow the lectionary, but this one sort of caught my attention. So I'm reading this passage about the laborers and the vineyards, and in my mind, one person comes to mind, such that I couldn't even think of anybody else, and I'd like to tell you about this person.

His real name is Mark. Crusty, obstinate, stubborn, very street smart, sexist as the day is long, and headstrong. He was a dairy-cattle buyer. So if you have a dairy farm, milking your cows, and you want to buy ten more cows, you give Mark a call, and he goes to the auction, and buys cows for you. He had an incredible way.

I went to auction with him once. He has a way of looking at a cow that's a hundred feet away being auctioned off, and looking and telling what its weight is, how much milk it's going to give, and meanwhile the auctioneer is saying a dollar twenty-one per pound on the hoof, a dollar twenty-one, a dollar twenty-two, a dollar twenty-two, a dollar twenty-three. And he's doing the math in his head, figuring out whether this cow is a good buy for a herd that he's buying for.

The Crusty Dairy-Cattle Buyer Died Saying, "I've Seen It"

He was foul-mouthed, and basically his sources of nutrition were whisky, venison, and butter. After church once, he wanted to talk to me about something, and so we have the coffee hour after church. I lived in the manse right next door to the church at the time, and I had come over to the house, and there he was, having let himself in, sitting at my kitchen table, drinking my whiskey, waiting for me.

He died at 91 with that diet of whiskey, venison, and butter. And I buried him in May of 2010. It was a fascinating funeral. Rarely have I had that much material on a person, but at 88, he had a near-death experience. And for those last two-and-a-half, three years of his life, unfortunately he was extremely inarticulate. All he could say was, "Art, I've seen it. I've seen it." But what I saw was the change in the man. He wasn't crusty any more. He wasn't sexist any more. Ninety-some years of being sexist, and suddenly people were equal in his view. He had a tranquility about him, a peace about him that I had never seen for the last two to three years of his life before he died.

The Importance of Belief Lies in the Health of Your Soul in Forgiveness

And so he came to mind when I was reading this passage. There is an eleventh-hour laborer, receiving his reward as well.

It's important that we believe in God's total forgiveness. And the reason for it is that there is nothing more important for the health of your soul and my soul than learning how to forgive. Nothing is more important. Let me word it negatively. There is nothing more toxic, there is nothing more stunting, there is nothing more debilitating for our soul than refusing to forgive, to holding on to the pain, the anger, and the hurt.

There is nothing more important than believing fully in the total forgiveness of God. And the first step in learning how to forgive is to realize that we are forgiven totally, the first and the last.

Amen.