



Proper 20, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
September 20, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man was desperate to find a job but he got turned for everything he applied for. Finally he decided to take a different approach – he answered an ad for a position as a nuclear engineer, even though he had majored in art history and never worked in a nuclear power plant.

On his resume he claimed to have the education but didn't claim to have any job experience and he got an interview. Somehow he managed to double talk his way through the interview until the supervisor asked him what sort of salary he was expecting. Not know what would be right, he said "\$500,000 a year!" And the supervisor said, "for a man with no experience you certainly are asking for a high salary" and the man blurted out "well, the work is much harder when you don't know what you're doing!"

Today's parable, like today's joke, is also about work and wages – what a day's labor is worth and who gets to decide that question. At a deeper level, though, today's parable is about forgiveness – it flows in the same stream of Jesus' teaching as last week's parable of the forgiving king and the unforgiving slave.

I'm struck this morning by the line we find in verse 15, where the landowner asks "are you envious because I am generous?" Interesting. This parable, like last week's parable, is about the abundant and compassionate life of God. A life that begins in the mystery of the love of the Father for the Son in the Holy Spirit and then overflows in their gracious act to bring us into existence and to immerse us into their life of love and communion through the Son's incarnation as the man Jesus Christ.

At first, such an abundant, generous life of love sounds wonderful. Who wouldn't want that? But then life has a way of interfering with our appreciation for the generous love of the Trinity. We begin to see events that strike us as unfair: good people get sick while bad people are the picture of health. One person works hard to succeed and yet fails, while another person falls into success and wealth through sheer dumb luck. We see some people get away with all sorts of sinful and outrageous behavior, seemingly unpunished for the way they

hurt others, while disaster befalls some of those who live lives of moral conviction. As someone once put it, “I’m not so bothered by why bad things happen to good people as I am by why *good things happen to bad people.*”

God is generous, giving love and goodness and blessing, to all alike, whether good or bad. And it makes us envious. In his book, *Immortal Diamond*, Richard Rohr argues that what is really called for by these circumstances is our forgiveness of God. That may be a startling thought to us, but Rohr argues that when the landowner says in verse 15, “are you envious because I am generous,” the deeper implication is that we must eventually let go of our anger and resentment towards God for all that God has allowed to happen. We must forgive God for allowing us to be free and to be blessed by his love.

God could have stopped humanity’s sin by taking away our free will. God could have created a world in which we are instantly punished for our every infraction of the rules and instantly blessed for every good deed we do. God could have created a world without suffering, where perfect little robots do exactly what they are programmed to do. But God did not create such a world because robots can’t live in loving communion with the Father, Son, and Spirit. For love to be love it must be freely chosen and for love to be freely chosen we must be truly free to choose – to either choose to do good or not do good, to either choose to love or not to love.

So, God chose love because God is love, and with love comes suffering. So God enters into our suffering with us, bearing with us through cross of Christ, the difficult consequences of a world in which a generous God gives life and freedom to all people. And out of his abundant and generous love, God forgives us for crucifying him, invites us to forgive him for the suffering our freedom has created, and then asks us to forgive one another as we have been forgiven.

Why? Because forgiveness is the only way forward in love. Love brings suffering and if we remain locked in unforgiveness, bitter and resentful of that suffering, then love dies and we die. It is only when we begin to forgive God, forgive one another, and forgive ourselves for the part we have played in these tragedies, that love can rise again, be renewed, and become everlasting.

Our prayer, then, is simple: may the same abundant, forgiving, love that is the heart of God’s life become the heart of our lives as well.

Amen.