

Mission, Folly, and Freedom

Matthew 20:1-16

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

What does “mission” mean? It means “to be sent.” We know that a majority of Christians are now in the Southern Hemisphere even though we should also point out that because Chinese Christians are being persecuted, their numbers are increasing (Tertullian: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”). Many in the Western world leave Christianity every day because they become secular. The table has also been turned over the source of missionaries. The largest number of missionaries proportionally, except for small groups, is from South Korea. The whole world of mission is different from what it used to be a generation ago.

In the Gospel of Matthew, it could be argued, we have the most emphasis on mission of all the four Gospels. We see this in the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Matthew’s concern for mission can be seen in other texts as well. For example, Matthew 7:20 states: “By their fruits you shall know them.” If we look at the context, we see that this not a claim for visible evidence of our faith in our lives; rather, it’s warning that not all missionaries are doing what they should be doing. With missionaries as with others, one must test the spirits (1 John 4:1).

In Matthew 25:31-46 in that great parable of the sheep and the goats, and the question comes: “Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger . . .” And the answer is: “As you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (Matt 25:40, 45). This text is often misused to claim our priority ought to be caring for the poor. But in the last hundred years a majority of scholarly commentaries understand that is not what the text is really about. Rather, “the least of these” refers to Christian missionaries, to those who went out to preach Christ. The church is to care for and support “the least of these my brethren” who are “making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” As these texts show, the Gospel of Matthew has an abiding concern for mission in a way we often overlook.

Then we have the text for this Sunday, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard and how some were paid for one hour the same as those who worked for twelve hours. We say to ourselves: "That's not fair, that's not just. What kind of a thing is this?" It's more than upside down. If we were to think of it in terms of baseball pitches, we might say: This is not a fast ball or a curve ball; this is a knuckleball, that which is hard to tell where it's going, and the batter even sees that it jumps.

What is this about? A God who is like this? We think we have it figured out. We think we have God figured out but we don't. He doesn't fit in a box. To give a human illustration of how we wrongly assume we have life figured out, consider the following true story. A few years ago a Roman Catholic nun spoke to an ecumenical group of Christians about how she had been allowed by her Order to live among the poor and experience real poverty. She did not even wear her garb among them. She ate what they ate, slept where they slept, and basically lived among them as they lived. She did this for five years and then gave it up. She said she gave it up because she realized she could not experience the real desperation of poverty. For example, if she had a medical crisis, her Order would always take care of her.

What does it mean to be "the last" or "the least"? We think we can do this or know what it means. The greatest threat to Christianity was in the Second and Third Centuries when it was very common to reduce Christianity to an idea, to wisdom (Gnosticism). We tend to do the same thing. We say Christianity means "grace." It means "love." Then we have a way of managing it and thinking about it. We tend to put God in a box. God has to be the way we think he has to be.

What is the heart of Christian mission? It is what we do when we confess the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed is really doing what we find in Ephesians 3:1-6, where it says the mystery that was hidden is now revealed, that is, God sent his Son to die and rise again for you and me, and he continues to be with us through his Spirit. That's the message. It is something different than grand claims about "grace" and "love." We find it especially in 1 Cor 1:18: "For the Word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Then in 1 Cor 1:21: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." It's foolishness and folly and scandal.

What does that mean for you and me? That's the message and we're the medium. The first great discovery of the Reformation is justification by faith alone. The second great discovery of the Reformation derives from the first one, and it is that

each one of us is a missionary. Each one of us has a calling, or in the words of Paul, each one is a gift. That's what he writes in Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-31. Each one of us is a *charisma*; each one of us has particular gifts, a place where we are put, where we are called upon to tell what it is all about, however our occupations are sorted out, each one of us in whatever way.

What does that look like? It is based on the baseline, which is that you and I through Word and sacrament, through the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper have something which is certain and on the basis of that we have the freedom to be his creatures, to live, to fight the battle against whatever is opposing the Gospel in this life now. That's what the mission is, God's mission, which we have to carry out. His mission is finished (John 19:30), but nevertheless we are also called upon to spread the Word, to tell others **he** solved the problem of sin and death, **he** died and rose again for you and me, and **he** helps us and is with us. Amen