Rewards

Matthew 20:1-16

A Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

The whole world of Christian mission is different from what it used to be a century ago. In 1900 only 20% of Christians worldwide lived in the Southern Hemisphere. Today 75% of Christians are in the Southern Hemisphere.

Today also there is widespread and increasing persecution of Christians, particularly in China, India, North Korea, and throughout the Muslim world. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that between 2005 and 2015, 900,000 Christians were killed for their faith. That's 90,000 per year.

At the same time, we know that contrary to our expectations, Christianity spreads under persecution. (Tertullian: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.")

The Gospel of Matthew, it could be argued, has the most emphasis on mission of all the four Gospels. We see this in the Great Commission at the end 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 call for evidence of our faith; 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, 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 to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40, 45). This text is often misused to claim our priority ought to be caring for the poor.

But that's not what the text is really about. Rather, "the least of these my brethren" refers to Christian missionaries. The church is to care for and support "the least of these my brethren," that is, those who are spreading the Word. 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 those who worked for one hour were paid the same as those who worked for twelve hours. "Not fair!" we say. What kind of a thing is this? It's more than upside down.

If we were to think of this 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 even the batter sees that it jumps.

What is this text about? It's about the fact that we think we have God figured out, but we don't. We can't put him in a box and announce he acts according to our expectations.

And what are our expectations for God?

They are like the expectations of a particular man who was recently widowed. He had always been a competent fellow but he found himself numb and not feeling much of anything at all. His wife had been a churchgoer, but he, not so much. After some months, he met with the pastor, in his mind, not because he needed anything, but mainly to thank him for her visiting his wife while she was sick.

In their conversation, however, the widower said that in his view God is like a heavenly bank. During your life you are supposed to make deposits in that bank. However, if you have not made regular deposits in that bank, you shouldn't be surprised that in your hour of need, you have no funds to access. That's just the way things are. That's how it all works.

But is it the way it is? Is God like a certified public accountant?

Or is God like a loving father who surprises his adopted children with gifts that are beyond all calculation? The God of the Bible is this loving father. He gives us all good things; he gives us rewards, but in a very different sense of "rewards," for his rewards do not depend on what one has done.

One of the greatest threats to Christianity came right at the beginning, in the Second and Third Centuries, when the early church was just getting off the ground.

What happened is that some Christians said the gospel was about God's "love" and "grace" and their mission was to spread God's love. They thought they had the right idea and were doing the right thing, but in fact they were losing the main thing. They were turning the gospel into "an idea" of love and grace (Gnosticism).

That happens today too, wherever well-meaning Christians say: "Our mission is to spread the love of God." It sounds so nice; we're good people doing good. Who could object?

But when this happens, the "idea" of "love" takes center stage, and we think we're better able to manage the gospel and think about it. God has to be the way we think he has to be. He has to work according to our expectations.

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 "love" and "grace," which are vague abstractions we can manage. We find it especially in 1 Corinthians 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?

The first great discovery of the Reformation is that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

The second great discovery of the Reformation derives from the first one, and that 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, not "has" a gift but "is" a gift. That's what Paul writes in Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-31. Each one of us is a *charisma*; each has particular gifts and a place where we are put in life, 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 his word and sacraments—have something which is certain, and because of that firm foundation, we have the freedom to be his sons and daughters in this time and place.

His mission is finished (John 19:30), but nevertheless, we are also called upon to spread the Word, that is, 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