

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Anchorage Alaska
Gospel Text: Matthew 20:1-16

Message preached by The Rev. Michael Burke
September 21, 2008

“From Entitlement to Gratitude”

Notice anything missing?

Timothy Merrill¹, an author, pastor, and preacher, recently wrote about 25 things vanishing from modern America. It's an intriguing list of things already gone or rapidly disappearing. According to Walletpop.com², among the top things “vanishing” from America, are the following:

Classified ads, movie rental stores, dial-up Internet access, phone landlines, Chesapeake Bay blue crabs, VCRs, ash trees, ham radio, the old swimming hole, answering machines, cameras that use film, incandescent bulbs, stand-alone bowling alleys, the milkman, handwritten letters, wild horses, personal checks, drive-in theaters, mumps and measles, honey bees, analog TV and the family farm.

Some we'll miss: **honeybees**, (the phenomenon of “colony collapse disorder” has devastated out honeybee populations) **handwritten letters** (2 million e-mails sent every second, in 2006), **wild horses** (32,000 free roaming horses in ten Western states, down from the original 2 Million 100 years ago), **classified ads and the morning newspaper**, (as we get more and more news and ads on the internet).

I suppose there's a couple we won't miss: like the **mumps and measles** (65 cases, down from over 200,00 in 1964), and **dial-up Internet service** with that chirping sound your old 28K modem used to make.

Some we'll be vaguely nostalgic about: LP records, the milkman (According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1950, over half of the milk delivered was to the home in quart bottles, by 1963, it was about a third and by 2001, it represented only 0.4% percent.), drive in theatres (405 left, and counting), photos made from film, landlines (down 55% since 2000, By November of 2007, an estimated 3.3 billion Earthlings owned cell phones, and 80% of the world's population had access to cell phone coverage), light bulb (new energy bill will phase them out in 4-12 years, while the adoption of CFLs are doubling every year.), analog TV (disappear February 2009) The next generation will never know what “rabbit ears” are, or were...

I have my own personal lists. Of things that are not vanishing, but should be:

Like a political campaign season that lasts for 24 months, stretch pants, reality TV shows, gravity-defying sagging trousers, powdered non-dairy creamer whose ingredient list reads like the inventory of a chemical warehouse, and fruit rollups that bear an uncanny resemblance to the vinyl front seat of my old 1974 Dodge Dart.

¹ In *Homileticsonline.com*, accessed 9-18-08.

² www.walletpop.com, accessed 9-18.08.

And there are things being rediscovered, things seemingly lost or forgotten for a time or generation, that are being valued anew:

Good coffee, outdoor recreational activities for adults, learning your family's history,

Things in the church, that are vanishing or gone:

For those who came of age in the 40s and 50s: Calling the priest "Father", wooden pews, (for Catholics) the mass in Latin, head coverings for women, the "churching of women" after childbirth, baptism as a private or family social occasion, forty-five minute expository sermons, the 1928 prayer book...

And a special list for those of you who came of age in the 1960s and 70s: Gone or vanishing are adult education classes on transcendental meditation, encounter groups, "The Way" Bible, The "Good News Bible", "value-neutral religious education", moral relativism, folk masses with tambourines, and Jesus Freaks.

Things that are being rediscovered: spiritual practices like prayer, personal daily bible study, or a "rule of life," the works of the early Church Fathers, chant, Holy Baptism as the center point of our liturgical life together, "authentic" relationships, children's ministries, tithing as a personal and family spiritual discipline, and the beauty of silence,

Some are both *being lost*, and for those who grew up never knowing them, *rediscovered*:

Family dinner hour, reading to your children, visiting your grandparents, coming to church every Sunday as a pattern and grounding in life, sharing worship as a family...

But behind the Gospel for today are both a "something lost" and a "something rediscovered".

Listen to the story of Jonah: Jonah is disturbed and angry that God doesn't punish Nineveh, but grants them mercy. To Jonah, this just isn't "fair", for the wicked "deserve" their punishment. And Jonah "deserves" the plant, the bush which has grown up and given him shade in the heat of the day.

In the Gospel, the landowner, in giving a full day's wages even to the ones who came to the vineyard late, has offended the sensibilities of the other hired hands. He has made them equal to the early arrivers. Those latecomers don't "deserve" a full days pay. Surely, if the latecomers get a full day's pay, don't those who came at the beginning of the day "deserve" even more?

Remember, for these past three weeks we have been talking about conflict, and especially about conflict within the faith community. For this new community of followers of Jesus, the biggest "conflict" is yet to come. Soon, those Jewish believers, and their place and standing as "first" within the community, will be put to the test, as the grace and power of God welcomes in new Gentile believers, who have in their possession little of the richness of history and tradition that was the particular inheritance of the Jewish believers.

Very soon the "great reversal" of the Gospel will require them to leave behind the sense of expectation and entitlement (of history, and ethnicity, and tradition) as the Jesus-centered Gospel community explodes into the Gentile world.

So, what about you and me?

Where, in the world *around us*... ...Where, in the world *within us*...
... does the Gospel call us to confront our own sense of entitlement?

And how much of our own disappointment, bitterness, or sadness about life can be traced back to our sense of expectation or entitlement?

This is what I mean by *entitlement*: Expecting that things should always be the same. Expecting that we “deserve” this, that, or the other thing, because, well ...we’ve worked hard for it and we’ve paid our dues. Expecting that because we came early to the vineyard, (that is, *if* we came early to the vineyard...) ours will always be the greater reward. That sense of irritation and resistance, perhaps at times even resentment... ...that someone, or some new thing, recently arrived, has displaced what we’ve all gotten used to and expect and are even entitled to.

But the Gospel does not merely confront us with the need to lose or leave behind our sense of entitlement. Gone...slipping away, like so many other things on our list of “vanishing acts”...

In its place, the Gospel calls us to rediscover something in our tradition that is even older. **Gratitude.**

By *gratitude* we mean a sense that all that we have is a blessing from God, all comes from God and all rightly belongs *to* God. We have no claim upon our lives, our possessions, our histories... **No claim to entitlement, for all is a gift.** We own nothing in this world – all is God’s, given into our hands for a fleeting moment in time, to be used for the purposes of God’s unfolding and in-breaking Kingdom. And God’s own self is both the Giver and the Gift. To wake up each day, and to rejoice in the newness of it all... Expecting nothing but the unfolding of God’s work in the world about us... ... within us...
...sometimes, yes, in old and comforting and familiar ways... and sometimes in the form of startlingly new things that God is doing in our lives right here, right now!

Last night I walked around my backyard, picking up a few things the dog and the kids had scattered around, and with the night breeze coming in, I started humming a Curtis Mayfield hymn from 1964:

*People get ready
There’s a train a-coming
You don’t need no baggage
You just get on board
All you need is faith
To hear the diesels humming
Don’t need no ticket
You just thank the Lord³*

I wonder if deep beneath the wave-tossed words of today’s Gospel is a call to simplify the list of things you and I absolutely *must* take with us, on the journey from today into tomorrow.

³ Curtis Mayfield, “People Get Ready”, 1964.

To simplify the list of the things that we as a church *must* take with us, into the future that God calls us to...

“Don’t need no baggage... you just thank the Lord!”

Leaving behind all our expectations and entitlements, rolling’ down the rails with the rhythm of gratitude.

Change isn’t new. As they say, “The only thing that remains the same is change.” But the pace and speed of change in our lifetime *is* new. And as the speed, the tempo, of change *increases*, the size of the bag we are permitted to “carry-on” into the future gets smaller and smaller.

Our task, now more than ever, is to discern wisely, what is to be kept, what must necessarily be parted with, both things we will miss and things we will not...

I wondered last night about the things we will miss: What losses are to be *mourned*, because, after all, grieving is a healthy and even holy thing at times,

and what losses are to be *celebrated*, things that we are grateful that we will not pass along to yet another generation, even the sins of the past.

Let us hold one another in prayer... ...for the Spirit will surely lead us into the knowledge... ...of what is to be retained, and what is to be rediscovered.

Let the church say, “Amen.”

The Holy Gospel for Sunday, September 21, 2008

The Gospel

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you

not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

From "God Will Be God" -- A Commentary on Matthew 20:1-16⁴

The remarkable parable Jesus tells in this week's gospel text is found only in Matthew. Nevertheless, the startling message this parable communicates is considered by many scholars to be an excellent candidate for being classed as a genuine word from Jesus. The classic parable structure, its skillful telling and the power of its unexpected conclusion, all suggest the special creativity and uniqueness of Jesus' own insights and teachings.

Matthew introduces this parable into his gospel with his traditional "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." formula. The first seven verses of this parable slowly and dramatically lay out all the characters and details of this story. The landowner Jesus describes is a "hands-on" kind of executive. He is probably only moderately well-off, for although he is capable of hiring many day laborers, the owner himself makes the trip to the marketplace to select the workers for the day. Not until verse 8 do we hear that there even exists a manager to help oversee the workers and the fields.

The landowner is apparently neither overly generous nor miserly in his marketplace negotiations. The denarius he agrees to pay is the accepted amount of a standard day's wages for such workers. The normative "day" required for these men to earn their wages is at least 12 hours -- from dawn until the first stars are visible in the evening sky -- obviously, a long and exhausting day of work.

After hiring his first batch of workers, the landowner returns "about nine o'clock" to the marketplace -- the "union hall" of the first century -- and finding unemployed laborers waiting there, he promptly hires them and sends them out to his vineyards. This scene is repeated again at noon, three and five o'clock. Each time, idle laborers are employed and sent out to work.

In verse 8, the second half of this parable begins. The landowner gives his manager specific instructions for paying all the workers. By paying the last-hired first, those first-hired not only witness the landowner's generosity toward these late-hired workers -- but they also have to wait around, adding even more precious minutes to their long, hard day.

The landowner's pay scale is truly startling, to both the listener/reader and the workers --for all the workers are paid the same, one denarius -- a day's wage. Immediately, the listener/reader knows there will be trouble -- for before the first-hired are even paid, they assume they will surely receive more than those hired last. When they do not, both listener/reader and the first-hired are righteously indignant. So disgruntled are these workers that they take the remarkable chance of voicing their outrage directly to the landowner. Surprisingly, their complaint does not focus on some new negotiations or on a suggestion about what their wages actually should be. Instead, in the revealing words of this parable, the first-hired wail, "You have made them equal to us" (v.12). Though it is the landowner's pay scale that has brought about this outburst, the complaint itself focuses on something other than money.

The first-hired were at the marketplace hiring center at dawn in hopes of getting a full day's work, a full day's pay. Those who showed up later than at dawn did so knowing that the chances of being hired were slimmer and their expected wages would be less. It seems reasonable to conclude that the later a worker showed up at the local hiring center, the less concerned that worker was with having a job and earning a living. The suggestion

⁴ In www.homileticonline.com, accessed 9-18-08.

made clearer by the first-hired workers' outcry is that only lazy, shiftless, unconcerned individuals would show up searching for work at five o'clock in the afternoon. No wonder the first-hired are appalled that the landowner has "made them equal" with the hardworking, early-bird workers who showed up at dawn and worked through the "burden of the day" and the "scorching heat" (v.12).

Just as it was surprising for the hired day laborers to confront their employer, so it is unusual that he deigns to give them a reply. But he does. Again, although the day's wage is the unspoken issue here, the focus is once again beamed elsewhere. First, the landowner defends himself against the charge of unfairness -- he has paid his workers exactly the agreed-upon amount. The landowner has kept his word to his workers. As for those who came late to the vineyard, the landowner asserts that it is his decision to do whatever he likes with them. In verse 15, this landowner chastises the attitude of the first-hired throughout this incident--yet he also graciously gives them and their surliness a "way out." The text asks whether it is the uncontrollable power of the "evil eye" (i.e., envy) that prompts those hired first to complain about the landowner's generosity. Surely, he suggests, it is not simply their own mean-spiritedness.

Matthew adds a final addendum to the parable itself in verse 16, promising that the first will be last and the last first in the coming kingdom of God. But Jesus' parable is really more about the radical, uncontrollable nature of God's grace, than it is about shifting social and economic standings.