

Sermon: Just love everyone; I'll sort 'em out later
16 Pentecost, Year A
Matthew 20:1-16

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An email came my way this week with some of the following messages on church sign boards: "Forgive your enemies. It messes with their heads." "Too hot to keep changing sign – sin bad, Jesus good – details inside." "Tweet others as you would like to be tweeted." And my favorite of the day. "***Just love everyone; I'll sort 'em out later – God.***"

It is difficult to love everyone. We know this. Jesus knew this, too. Jesus also knew that human beings have a strong inclination to want to step on others, even to oppress others, to make us feel better about ourselves. People often think, "if we step on others, if we come out on top, then we must be really something!" Jesus has a way of rearranging the patterns of "natural" thinking.

In today's parable of the laborers, Jesus does just that: turns some of our natural inclinations upside down. Jesus says, 'The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.' Jesus then proceeds to tell the story of others who were hired throughout the day and at the end of the day, things take an interesting turn. The landowner ends up paying the workers all the same wage – the ones who had only worked a little while were paid the same as those who worked all day. Objection! So not *fair*! Fair labor laws are thrown out into the wind. This doesn't sit well with those of us who are all about fairness, for those of us who keep careful tabs about who deserves what.

"The last will be first and the first will be last," Jesus says. The kingdom of heaven is weird. Maybe Jesus is saying to his disciples and to us that the kingdom of heaven is broader and deeper than what seems "fair". That the generosity of God's love is primo. And if God's love is THE THING to consider then maybe we shouldn't be so concerned about coming out on top. Maybe we need to leave the outcome to God and let God sort it out. Perhaps our job is simply to be about the business of love. Emulating God's indiscriminant love.

I am haunted today by what I saw in Ken Burns' and Lynn Novak's brilliant documentary on the Vietnam War that has been airing on PBS this past week. In what appears to be a fair and balanced account of the Vietnam War, love for humanity is challenged throughout the war. The idea of who the enemy was shifted again and again. Were all North Vietnamese the enemy? At one stage 75% of those in the South Vietnamese countryside were part of the Viet Cong, certainly seen as the enemy. One day Vietnamese would be on one side and the next day they were on the other. The leaders of South Viet Nam could hardly have been seen as American allies in how they conducted themselves at times. Often there were no uniforms or visible battle lines to differentiate ally from enemy. From most vantage points the war was a terrible quagmire.

One North Vietnamese man who was interviewed said he remembered watching some American soldiers gathering their wounded and dead after a battle and seeing them weeping. He said to himself, "These Americans are just like us, they care for each other". He saw in that moment other human beings. And yet to be able to kill the so-called enemy, soldiers on both sides often had to demonize, or dehumanize each other in order to "get the job done." The dead body count

of the enemy was an odd and only way of measuring success. One American battle leader told his troop that he would give a case of whiskey to the first soldier who brought back the head of the enemy. Who was the enemy? Was it the North Vietnamese? Was it that American soldier? Was it the Communists? Was it the Americans who kept thinking they could win the war if we just sent over 50,000 more troops? Who wins at war?

Well, we might wonder what this has to do with us who are not officially at war. Perhaps the enemy appears within us every time we fail to treat other human beings with dignity and respect and allow ourselves to dehumanize people. Current theologian Richard Rohr writes, *“The root of violence is the illusion of separation—from God, from Being itself, from being somehow one with everyone and everything.* Most of our conflicts arise from a very fragile sense of the self. When we’re full of fear, the enemy is everywhere. We endlessly look for the problem outside of ourselves so we can expel or exterminate it.” If a prophetic peacemaker attempts to take our chosen object of hatred away from us, we turn our hatred on them. Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others were persecuted or killed because they challenged the myth of scapegoating.”

At the end of today’s parable the landowner says to the grumbling laborers who had worked all day for a decent wage, “Are you envious because I am generous?” The generosity of God is difficult to absorb. “The last shall be first and the first shall be last.” Who do we consider last or of least importance? Who do we consider first or of greatest importance? In God’s kingdom there is no one who does not matter. All are worthy of God’s love. Who do you consider your enemy? Is it your neighbor whose dog won’t stop barking? Is it the person with whom you disagree about confederate monuments or politics in general? Is it our president or leaders of other nations? [Is it your priest who preaches something you don’t want to hear? (☺)]

Can we remember that while we are often under the illusion that we are separated from God and from one another, the deep reality is that we are actually totally connected to God and one another. Life is not a competition, but a gift for us to humbly receive. While we ponder God’s endless generosity, can we “just keep loving everyone and let God sort us out later”?

Amen.