

“The Eye”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Matthew 20:1-16

March 17, 2019

Second Sunday in Lent

I had planned to preach a fairly standard sermon this morning about this text. I wanted to preach about economic justice through God’s eyes. I wanted to preach about the reality of a bountiful world versus the sinister myth that there’s not enough to go around. I wanted to cross my fingers and hope nobody remembered the last time I preached on this text, when I used a line from one of my mentors about how you don’t need to put a lid on a coffee can full of crawfish, because they’ll pull any of their comrades who make a run for the lip of the can back down to the bottom of the can.

Truthfully, I’ve studied this parable quite a bit, and I have a lot of ideas to share about it. And you still might hear some of those. We’ll see. I’m truly not sure where this sermon might go, because an awful thing happened this weekend. And then a wonderful thing happened. And together they caused me to scrap my outline and start over.

If you’ve seen any news, you know the awful part: In shooting attacks at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand on Friday, at least fifty people were killed and many more were injured. I’ve never been to New Zealand, so I just kept thinking about the incredible hospitality that has been offered to members of this church by the Birmingham Islamic Society. We have been invited to learn about Islam, to observe prayer during Ramadan, and in the most interfaith, universal sacrament of peace, we have been fed copious amounts of delicious food.

I want to let you know right now that there is an interfaith prayer vigil tonight at 6 p.m. at the Islamic Society’s Hoover Crescent Center. I will be hiking with the Youth Group, but anyone from this congregation is invited to participate.

The second, much happier thing that happened this weekend was the ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament of the Rev. Mary Sellers Shaw. Mary Sellers preached here about a year and a half ago, and I was privileged to help guide her through her ordination process and to be a part of the service yesterday at Independent Presbyterian Church. In our tradition, during an ordination service the newly minted minister receives a “charge” from a mentor or a friend or a colleague.

The charge tends to be a series of to-dos and advice for strong leadership: don’t let busyness get in the way of prayer, be sure to take time to rest, don’t take yourself as seriously as you take Jesus, stay connected to the things that give you life, offer your congregation and yourself an abundance of grace. That kind of stuff.

The Reverend Lucy Turner, in her charge to the new pastor yesterday, talked about remembering the tears she shed at the death of a beloved church member. Lucy said she

wished that when she was beginning her ministry, somebody had told her how much she'd end up loving these people.

Now we were at Independent Presbyterian Church — a far more refined place than ol' Edgewood — and so I bit my lip to stop myself from shouting the words that were pounding in my heart as Lucy spoke: "Amen, sister! Yes! Yes! That! That's what I needed to hear! She's right! Y'all don't even know!"

The stories of gunshots piercing peaceful prayer combined with Lucy putting words onto the jumbled mess of my heart had me mentally un-writing the sermon I was going to preach to you this morning. Time and time again I have stepped into this pulpit after churchgoers and synagogue-goers and nightclub-goers and elementary school-goers...and I've ranted and I've lamented and I've sought to offer a word of hope. But something about this particular completely unnecessary tragedy broke me in a different way this weekend. And then Lucy named it out loud. And so I can't promise there won't be ranting. There will likely be lamenting.

But what I am here to tell you this morning is that I love you. I tell you every week that you are beloved by God: no matter what you have done, no matter who you love, no matter what your body looks like nor how it functions, no matter the burdens you carry, no matter the struggles you endure, no matter what a pain in the *tuchus* you are to God, you are beloved.

I am fully aware that there are a lot of churches that won't tell you that. I don't have time for them this morning. Y'all, God's unconditional love is an easy message to share. It's true. It's wonderful. I believe it. It's comfortable for me to say to you.

But to tell you that I love you is a bit trickier. I imagine some of you might be squirming just as much as I am. We try to show each other love all the time. But to say it out loud is harder. And yet we always regret not saying such vulnerable things more often down the road.

So deal with it. It's been a weird weekend. And we're in the season of Lent, which is profoundly weird in itself. So: I love you. I love you when you show up for one another in ways that make my jaw drop and when you send me into fits of laughter. I love you when you step up to help the Magic City Acceptance Center or to build a school in the Congo. I love you when you care for me and my family. I love you when you shock me with your capacity for being open to new ideas and new people and new things that might be making your brains explode, but which you encounter with warmth and curiosity and fierce grace that can only be described as discipleship.

And I love you when you get frustrated with me or with each other. I love you when you put up with my shenanigans and when I have to bite my tongue. I love you when you wonder if I've gone off the deep end. I love you when you don't like the hymn. I love you when we act like humans and cautiously look up to see if God was paying attention. I love you when we laugh at ourselves.

I love you when we're all sitting here listening to Jesus tell one of his parables and we simultaneously think he is making absolutely no practical sense at all and that he is saying something we know to be true.

I love you when you let me get away with transitions like that.

The first vineyard workers are totally down with the plan to get a denarius for their twelve hours of labor. The Greek here — I love you when you let me use some Greek! — uses the verb *sumphónéó*, like “symphony.” The householder and the laborers were in harmony about the plan.

And for some reason this guy goes back looking for more workers. This is where if you have never heard this story before, you've got a leg up on the rest of us, because if you grew up with this story you've likely heard some explanation about who these later workers are. Maybe they're lazy loafers who didn't get up at the crack of dawn. Or perhaps they get older or less physically able as the day goes on. Maybe they already worked another job and came back looking for more work. Maybe they had someone to care for most of the day. The truth is that Jesus doesn't say or imply any of that.

In any case, the man goes back, and then again in the mid-afternoon, and then again just an hour before quitting time. What is he doing? Either this has more work in his vineyard than he thought, or he can't find enough workers each time he goes looking.

Or he's got another agenda entirely.

He's acting pretty strangely, but nobody seems concerned. Not until it's time to get paid. The workers who barely got started get paid first, and that denarius must have seemed like a miracle to them. To them, and to the all-day laborers. *If he gave them a denarius, this guy must be awfully generous. Score!*

But they receive a denarius as well, exactly what they had gotten harmonious about twelve hours earlier. And they grumble. They resent this awfully generous vineyard owner's generosity because it is not fair. Last week we talked about forgiveness and how *it's* not fair — how it's not a balanced equation. It's not transactional, but relational. It seems Jesus is on his Unfairness Tour. This situation is so clearly unfair. And we find out what Jesus thinks of that in the response of the householder:

“Friend, I am doing you no harm.”

We need to talk about this “friend” business. More Greek: the word translated “friend” here is only used three times in all of Matthew's Gospel.¹ This is the first time. It's used again in the parable we're going to read next week. I won't spoil it, but the guy who gets called “friend” in that story ends up thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The third time is in the garden at Gethsemane when Judas arrives to betray Jesus. Judas greets Jesus and kisses him and Jesus replies, ““*Friend*, do what you are here to do.”

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, p. 232

I think it's fair to say that Matthew uses "friend" with a bite to it. We saw last week that those who don't forgive are in big trouble. And the one who begrudges outlandish generosity is spoken of as Judas is.

The lord of the vineyard wonders if the grumbler has a green, envious, evil eye because he is generous.

And it doesn't make sense, this way of doing business.
And Jesus, as usual, is looking with a different eye, with a different agenda.

And what if this is the way we could create a world where we no longer brace ourselves for devastation each time we flip on a screen or turn on the car radio? What if salvation from terror is found through ensuring that every worker has enough to eat and to live? What if such generosity in wealth and in love is what Jesus is after from us? How would our world look different if we didn't ask "What does each deserve?" but instead, "What can we give to each?"

Well that makes no sense. And yet we know it is true. It's an enigma wrapped in a conundrum stuffed inside a fortune cookie. That'll get in your head and your heart and your tummy. It'll keep you up at night, worried that you're doing it all wrong and glad you've got someone to pray to and desperate to hug the ones you cherish.

That's what parables do.

That's what trekking the path to the cross will do.

That's what walking through Lent looking inside of yourself to find a connection to something bigger will do.

That's what a church full of people you love will do.

Amen.