What does God’s goodness look like?

At the outset of writing this sermon, I typed those six words ... and then I stopped, staring at them as the cursor on my computer screen flashed over and over again, waiting for me to spell out my next thought. Flashing and waiting, flashing and waiting: my next thought; my next thought.

In those initial moments, my next thought was in fact a series of thoughts ... really a series of questions: Where for instance is the goodness in a pandemic? Where is the goodness in a struggling economy? Where is the goodness in churches that can’t gather in the same ways to which they had grown accustomed? Where is the goodness in a hurricane season that has gone into overdrive or in fires that are destroying entire communities?

Where is the goodness in the chaos that has disrupted the calm? Where is the goodness in the fear that has overshadowed the peace of our lives? Where is the goodness in perhaps seeing ourselves reflected in this parable, the ones who may have felt a bit more like we were closer to the front, closer to first ... and now feeling instead like we are nearer the back, closer to last?

Today’s Gospel reading from Matthew offers a wide variety of topics on which someone could preach. We have a feeling arising among a certain group in this parable from Jesus that they have been treated unfairly or are the victims of inequality. We have the honesty of the landowner who paid to each of his workers exactly what was promised them. Out of a practical need for tending to his vineyard, he goes back several times to hire more and more day laborers – yes, to ensure a good harvest and his own security but intentionally or otherwise also to provide opportunities for a greater number of people to support themselves and whatever families they may have had.

Throughout this passage as well we have the underlying theme of goodness, namely the goodness of the landowner. But from whose perspective are we really able to see the goodness inherent in this parable? Where is Jesus directing us to look to see the true goodness here?

I’m sure that for some the immediate instinct is to view this parable from the perspective of those who have worked the longest. They were out early that morning, waiting patiently – or perhaps even impatiently – to see what if any work they could obtain that day. Not long before working hours begin the landowner appears and begins to ask one, and then another, and then another if they are interested in spending a day tending the vineyard. They agree on the wage – and that is an important word: agree; this isn’t a situation in which the landowner says, “This is what you will receive” but rather one in which a negotiation is held and agreement is reached. And off to work they go.

Throughout the day those working in the vineyard see more and more people joining them, perhaps some they recognized from when they themselves were standing in the street early
that morning, waiting for work. 9:00. Noon. 3:00. 5:00. More and more workers appeared in
the vineyard, workers who had been standing and waiting all day, a testament to just how
much work was required in the vineyard. It was a blessed day for those workers and for
their families; they would receive a day’s wage and they and their families could eat that
night … or pay off a portion of a debt they owed … or perhaps even contribute it as an
offering at the Temple.

As they departed that evening, the workers lined up for their pay, beginning with those
brought in at the end of the day. Imagine a long line of workers, moving one by one to a
small table where the vineyard’s manager was seated with a box or bag, handing out the
denarius that each had agreed to for their day’s wage, a denarius being the average paid for
one day’s work in that time. In today’s dollars that is roughly $3.62, certainly not much now
but a lot to those workers in that time.

First it was one at the back of the line – a worker who had come in the first group that
morning – who might have noticed a late-arriving worker walking away with a denarius.
The thought “Wait; he was only here for an hour” may have flashed in his mind. He nudges
the worker in front of him, pointing out what was happening. Then another from that first
batch of workers is nudged, sees what is happening and begins to grumble. Through all of
this, as the manager is paying the wages, the landowner may have been standing off to the
side, watching as his work crew for that day departed after hours of work.

Perhaps he could see the nudges and pointing and disapproving looks before he heard the
grumbling, but he knew something was going on. He walked over to the back of the line and
received the complaints directly from the workers. As we just heard, he tells them, “Friend,
I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?”

Rather than continuing down the narrative path, however, I want to circle back and return
to the topic I raised at the beginning: What does God’s goodness look like? In the parable the
first of the workers – humanity – thought that the goodness of the landowner – God – was
in paying the wage they agreed to at the start of the day. But their idea of goodness
devolved into bitterness and anger when they saw that everyone was receiving the same
wage. The joy of being hired for the day changed into a type of individual consumerism: why
are they getting the same as me?

Sometimes the true goodness of God isn’t seen in what we receive from God, but in stepping
back – standing at the end of the line – to see the joy in the faces of others as God gives to
them. As I read in a commentary on this passage,

We are too close to ourselves, too wrapped in our own skins, too bundled in our own
terrible needs, to see truly what God gives us. What God, in goodness and
generosity, gives us we are likely to assume is our due, something we have earned, a
goodness we have fabricated for ourselves. We see other people more clearly than we
see ourselves. Thus when we see God’s goodness to others – to people we love, to
friends, to colleagues, but most especially to those people we do not think deserve

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1 Matthew 20:13 (NRSV).
such generosity – then we can see the goodness of God for the wondrous miracle that it is.  

Jesus’ parable does what his message to us does so often: it flips the narrative; it turns our expectations on their heads; perhaps it even makes some people uncomfortable. For so many who turn to Jesus for comfort, I know it’s challenging to hear a message that makes us squirm in our seats a bit. “The last will be first, and the first will be last.” Imagine the discomfort of the disciples and others gathered around Jesus that day as he shared this parable, and the incredulous looks he likely received.

But underneath the challenge and discomfort, there is a message of love … a message of God’s love for everyone. When we lift our eyes from where we are standing in line and look to someone else in line, we may very well discover the joy of seeing how God is at work in their life. And while we may not see it in the place where we are standing, we will never know the joy someone else may receive in their witness to how God is at work in our lives.

Perhaps at the end of the day, one of the greatest things we can do as members of the family of God – perhaps one of the greatest gifts we can give to one another – is by sharing with someone else the joy we may find in seeing how God is at work in their life. Perhaps the greatest joy is in giving hope and sight to someone else who may because of their own blindness may feel hopeless.

In the times of most difficulty … in the times when we may feel most blind to what is going on in our own lives … sharing these glimpses will remove the blindfolds we may feel on our eyes and may change the line in which we all stand into a circle we all share.

The circle of God’s love for all of God’s children.

Amen.

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3 Matthew 20:16 (NRSV).