

## **"STOP! LOOK, AND LISTEN"**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

**September 24, 2017**

20<sup>1-2</sup> "God's kingdom is like an estate manager who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. They agreed on a wage of a dollar a day, and went to work.

3-5 "Later, about nine o'clock, the manager saw some other men hanging around the town square unemployed. He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage. They went.

5-6 "He did the same thing at noon, and again at three o'clock. At five o'clock he went back and found still others standing around. He said, 'Why are you standing around all day doing nothing?'

7 "They said, 'Because no one hired us.'

"He told them to go to work in his vineyard.

8 "When the day's work was over, the owner of the vineyard instructed his foreman, 'Call the workers in and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first.'

9-12 "Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, 'These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.'

<sup>13-15</sup> "He replied to the one speaking for the rest, 'Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the one who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my own money? Are you going to get stingy because I am generous?'

<sup>16</sup> "Here it is again, the *Great Reversal*: many of the first ending up last, and the last first."

Chris and I saw a fantastic movie earlier this week. "Wind River" is a story based in fact about a crime investigation on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. It is very well-done film, with excellent acting and a suspenseful plot. It also has a lot to teach viewers about how one Native American family grieves the death of a family member, in this case an 18-year old daughter. Whoever the technical advisor was for the film did her or his job well. The screenplay was compelling, but I found myself being drawn more into the cultural anomalies of the movie, ethnic traditions that echoed in my mind what I have learned about journeying with a Native American grieving the loss of a child.

I learned again through this story that silence is the best gift an outsider can give a family in this circumstance. Being present in this time of sadness and loss means sitting quietly apart from the grieving family, avoiding idle chit-chat, well-meaning platitudes, and direct eye contact. I watched a father paint a death mask on his face and sit

outside in silence for hours. I watched an anguished mother cutting herself and bleeding in a ceremonial showing of oneness with the dead, calling forth the *Great Spirit* that would take the dead into the afterlife. I watched a brother experience denial, then overwhelming pain, and then a distancing from others. I watched in disbelief and sadness a statement run across the screen that disappearances of Native American girls are generally not recorded in tribal records.

I watched all these things fly past my eyes, making me confused, upset, and unnerved. I watched and I was aware that I was not of that culture, but that I was tempted to judge it, comparing it to my own middle-class, white standards of what should happen in this circumstance. This is the experience of "othering," what some will call "white privilege," or even "systematic racism."

That is to say, the standards I use to analyze the actions of another culture are the standards with which I am most familiar and comfortable. In my case, that would be the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, middle-class ways of doing things. By measuring what unfolds before me by that standard, I am projecting my customs and culture on others, and if their actions do not measure up to what I think should be happening, I instinctually belittle them or reject them as "weird" or "crude" or "backward" or "wrong."

And my skin bristles when someone looks at me and talks about racism in the same breath. I don't consider myself a racist. But I am white-aware when I see stories like Wind River and can only tangentially relate to its cultural norms. What I mean by that is that when I pass by a Muslim woman in full covering, I am aware of our differences immediately. When I pass by an Orthodox Jewish man walking to synagogue, my attention is drawn to his hair braids-his payot-and I can't help but be aware of our differences. And because I know my ways, I instinctually think my ways are better than hers or his.

Maybe this is your experience, too. I am calling myself out and maybe you will be able to relate—with grace—with your own feelings and reactions.

Joanne Cacciatore, in a guide written for social workers and grief care workers serving Native American populations, teaches that,

*institutions often fail to provide "appropriate support and intervention for families of color, families of the poor, and immigrant families. These family norms and values are different and therefore remain peripheralized, invalidated, and pathologized . . . or worse, invisible.*

The prevailing societal norms of the white culture tend to dismiss those

norms and practices that do not fall into line. The result is the "othering" of the non-white person, system, practice, or culture.

Cacciatore writes that in working with Native Americans, "humility and a willingness to learn" the cultural values are of the utmost importance, and she suggests social workers working with non-white clients abandon their "academic arrogance." Awareness. Awareness and a willingness to leave white cultural norms at the door. Awareness and a willingness to perceive that white ways are not the ways of the Native American, and white ways are not best for the Native American in mourning.

\*\*\*\*\*

One of our young adults in the congregation told her mother of a story that upset her, a recent occurrence at a college in Colorado. One of the female coeds was hosting a makeup and hair demonstration in her dorm, and she invited several of her college friends to attend. One of the girls was African American. She was excited to come to the party and demonstration, but her excitement soon was washed away, as the demonstrator brought no hair care products that she could

use. Instead, the demonstrator assumed all the girls at the party would be white, and the African American girl was left out, embarrassed, and "othered," well aware of her minority status. We don't want to think of this story as one of white privilege. We would rather think of it as an honest mistake, not a big deal, kind of a laugher.

But it is a big deal to a college student who felt like one of the girls until this night, who felt like just your average sophomore until she was made so painfully aware that the norm was white, and she was not white, and therefore, outside the circle. The white girls could assume that their hair-care needs would be covered in the presentation, but the African American girl found out that hers could not, that she could assume *nothing*. Awareness. Awareness of being white.

\*\*\*\*

A Moroccan family has a special needs child. The school system sends an experienced evaluator out to the family's home to assess the services the child will need in the public school system. Aware of her ethnic and cultural difference, the evaluator is careful to cover her elbows, knees, and ankles and when she arrives in the Muslim home, she takes off her shoes in the foyer. She has been trained and she

respects the culture of the family although it is light-years away from her own cultural upbringing and social rules. The family is appreciative and the respect shown by the evaluator helps the session go well. Getting back in her car at the end of the session, the evaluator is white-aware of hers and the family's differences. She smiles that a little pre-planning and her willingness to respect the culture of the other has given this child a great start on his educational plan. Awareness.

\*\*\*\*

God, as the vineyard owner, is the one who goes to the marketplace on a given day and invites unemployed laborers God finds there to come and help build the kingdom. God breaks into the human experience as the sun is breaking over the ridge and invites those waiting to come and join in the effort, to harvest the grapes and to make them into wine.

This parable read today to you by Pam is often put forth as a polemic against fairness. It is *unfair* that the workers who put in a full day's labor are only paid one denarius—barely enough money to support one hungry mouth, much less a family of starving, lower-class children. The story is *unfair* because the fools who work all day under the hot Jerusalem sun are paid the same amount as the lucky ones who

are hired at the end of the day and who work very little. This is not the American way. This is not the way of capitalism. This is not the way the working class should be treated. It is simply not *fair* to those who make the assumption that their work will be valued according to their effort and that they will be paid accordingly.

Ah, but this is not how *God* operates! Abraham gets no more of a piece of the kingdom of heaven than the *Gentile* who comes to know *God* thousands of years later. But Abraham gets no less a piece of the kingdom of heaven either. For as the parable teaches us, *God* does not discriminate. All are welcome to dine at the table, including the one who has collected the grain, kneaded the dough, and baked the bread. All are welcome at the table, including the one who has smelled the sweetness of the oven's delight and who has slid onto the bench to dine, reaching for the butter so as to spread it generously onto the slice.

Theologian Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn notes the old saying that, "assumptions are planned resentments. Whenever we assume anything," she writes, "we set ourselves up for possible disappointment or even worse, as we set the other person, place, or thing up as the object of our disappointment, anger or resentment." Awareness.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful," she asks, "if these were the only assumptions we made:

--God loves me and all of creation deeply and profoundly.

--I and all others are made in the image of God.

--God's generosity is beyond our wildest imagination.

--There is nothing I can do to earn or deserve God's generosity.

How different our lives would be if we lived from those assumptions!"

Indeed! How wonderful life would be if we lived with these assumptions and we applied them to everyone else, including those so very different from us! How much less complicated, how much less contentious, how much less divided the human creation would be.

Perhaps God doesn't care about *fair*. Perhaps God doesn't care about money, about who's on top and who is lesser, about who lays claim to the nations and who is subjugated, or about who claims the keys to the kingdom. Perhaps God is not impressed by who claims to sit nearest, to have been given a manifest destiny, to have been crowned the purest race, the best religion, or the chosen people. Perhaps God

loves us all, from the ones who perceive that they have earned that love to the ones who doubt they deserve any of it at all.

Awareness. Awareness that no matter what our identifier of the moment is, there is a privilege attached to it. Men enjoy privileges that I, as a woman, do not. I cannot have any job that I want. I cannot feel safe walking about on the streets at night alone. I have long lines to wait in at many public venues when I need to use the restroom. I cannot go into a tavern unaccompanied and not risk harassment; I cannot be paid the same as a man if I were to be a professional bowler or golfer or basketball player, (ok, I am not exactly built to be a basketball player!) a professional, or a laborer.

There is privilege that I am not afforded as a female. Now, if you paint me as a black woman, or a Native American woman, or a Latina woman, or a Muslim woman, think of all I just mentioned—it gets worse. *That is white privilege and gender privilege, too.* Some of you may not like this term—Privilege---it's not the same as white guilt, but it may feel that way. I don't mean it to.

I mean to make us all more *aware*. I mean to make us all aware that we are indistinct in the eyes and heart of God. I mean to make us all more unified in Christ and less divided in practice. I mean to have us see the stories that play out before us from the eyes, ears, and

hearts of the other, to see how we walk in their shoes. It's a spiritual discipline to first, call yourself out for the realities of who you are and what privileges you enjoy, and then second, to be aware of cultural differences and disparities of privilege.

\*\*\*\*

I was at a social gathering about a year ago when a woman a bit younger than I who I didn't know previously, started to tell a prostitution joke, a "hooker" story. I interrupted her and I told her that prostitution jokes are offensive to me so please stop telling the joke. She was very put off by me, and said something like, "what's wrong with you? It's just a *joke!*" Awareness. Helping others to be aware. There is nothing, *nothing* funny about prostitution. I have a lot of experience with prostitution from my work on the bench. I never once found anything about prostitution to laugh about.

When we are enjoying a cold one after the golf game, we can speak up when the blonde jokes start rolling. When we are at the corporate meeting, we can speak up when a manager makes a racial slur. When we are at the Thanksgiving table, we can speak up when someone starts the "rabbi, priest, and minister" jokes, the ethnic references, the gay jokes, or the religious digs. Awareness. In yourself and in others. That's what the Gospel seeks to have us be—

aware, alert, awake, and advocating for those without a voice in our locker rooms, at our dining tables, in our offices, and in our church.

Whether you work all day long for the body of Christ, or whether you take it completely for granted, grace and love win out over law and righteousness. Let us break bread together; let us extend the hand and heart of God to everyone we meet, but especially to those we don't completely understand.

*May It Be So.*