

Sermon transcript for 9/20/2020

Pastor Nancy Nyland

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When I was serving in parish ministry in a small-town setting, I had occasion to visit a man who was struggling with cancer. This man, Harvey, now in his seventies was a character in the community. He had a reputation of sorts. He wasn't always honest. He wasn't a hard worker. He used foul language from time to time, many times in very inappropriate ways. He didn't smell the best. He hung out on the street corner and asked for money. He never repaid it. Basically he just got by in life. He wasn't a member of my church, nor had he ever attended, but a friend of Harvey's knew that he was having a rough time and asked if I would go and visit.

I visited Harvey: once, twice, and then on a regular basis as he continued his battle with cancer. I listened to him talk about his life from childhood to his current age, 73. I listened to his unattained hopes and dreams. I listened to his life's challenges and lost opportunities. I got to know Harvey, and each time I visited, I would read some scripture and have a prayer with him. Gradually our conversations grew into Jesus conversations, and eventually, days before Harvey died, he asked to be baptized. So quietly in his hospital room, I baptized him.

Harvey's funeral was at the church that I was serving. Harvey and I had agreed that I could share the good news about his baptism, about his faith in Jesus, about his confidence that he had been given the gift of eternal life. As I thought about those from the community and those from the congregation who might be attending his funeral, I wondered if they would come with some judgment in their hearts, and so I chose the Gospel reading for Harvey's funeral that is the Gospel reading we have today from Matthew 20.

I think that Harvey is a perfect example of the message of this parable. A landowner hired laborers throughout the day. Early in the day probably around sunrise he hired some and he agreed to pay them the usual daily wage. And then he hired more laborers at 9, and noon, and 3, and then even more laborers at 5. It was late in the day and this was not the usual custom. When the laborers finished the day, and came to get their pay, the landowner ordered the manager to pay them. And guess what? They all got paid the same wage. Even though they'd begun that work at different times during the day, and some had work more, and some had worked less, they all got paid the same. The laborers who had been hired at sunrise began to grumble. That just wasn't fair.

As I thought about it, Harvey was one of the laborers who was hired at the end of the day, working in the vineyard for a very short time compared to other laborers. There were people in the congregation, people in the community, who had been laboring in God's vineyard for many years. Some, like me, were cradle-born Lutherans, and baptized as infants. Some had come to know God as a kid when they went to Vacation Bible School. Some had come to know God as a youth when they were invited to a youth event. Some had to come to know God when they were married, and as their Christian spouse invited them into their family, they also invited them into their church family. Some had come to know God later in life like Harvey.

The laborers who worked all day had grumbled because their wage was the same as the laborers hired at 5 in the evening. The landowner replied, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me or are you envious because I am generous?"

Here is how I see it. As I listened to Harvey tell me about his life, and his joys, and his struggles that mind you, he went through without knowing God, I realized how blest I was, because through all the joys and struggles in my life, I knew God. I knew that God was right there beside me. What a blessing! Everyday of my life I felt God's presence and strength and comfort and wisdom. I knew God's encouragement and his joy in my joy. I counted on my friend, Jesus, to walk with me and guide me and teach me. I relied on the spirit to stir in me and inspire me and give me wisdom as I made decisions. Everyday I got to labor. I got to be a disciple of Jesus, not had to but got to be a disciple of Jesus, a laborer in God's Vineyard. Can you relate?

Harvey had missed out on a lifetime of God. It was a privilege to know Harvey in the last days of his life, and to be an instrument of God's love and grace in his life. It was a privilege to be able to assure Harvey that God's gifts of forgiveness and love and salvation, the gift of God's grace, that all these gifts were his, all his. If we could earn our way into the kingdom, there would be no need for, no room for, no purpose for God's grace. Remember, there's nothing that we do, or don't do, that makes us worthy of God's grace, otherwise it would not be grace. God is a god of generosity, God is a god of radical love, God is a god of abundance, of abundant hope and peace and mercy. God is a god of grace. I wonder how many Harveys there are in your life waiting for, longing for, eager for what you have - a life giving relationship through God's gracious gift of God's son, Jesus. I wonder, my friends, how you might welcome those Harveys into a relationship with you, into a relationship with your faith community, into a relationship with Jesus. I wonder. Amen.