

8 October 2023, 19 Pentecost (Proper 22A, Track 1)  
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Psalm 19

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

### **Love in Action**

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

Today marks the third Gospel lesson in a row with three common features: a vineyard, a landowner, and workers. It is something of a triplet of triplets.

Two weeks ago, we heard the parable of a landowner who hires laborers at various times of day. He agrees to pay the first laborers the usual daily wage, but he ends up paying all the laborers, even the ones who worked only an hour, the same. Not surprisingly, the laborers hired earlier in the day are a bit miffed. They worked more, so shouldn't they get paid more? Well, their point is really the others worked less, so shouldn't those workers get paid less?

Last week, the parable was about a landowner and his two sons. The landowner asks both sons to go work in the vineyard. One says he will, but then he doesn't. The other says he won't, but then he does.

Today, we get the parable of a landowner who sets up his vineyard very nicely. Then he leaves, placing the stewardship of his vineyard in the hands of his tenants. When the landowner sends slaves to collect the rent, the tenants beat and kill the first group. The tenants do the same to the second, larger group. Lastly, the landowner sends his son. The tenants kill him too.

Let's read these parables allegorically. In all three, the landowner represents God. The vineyard represents the world. And the various sets of workers reflect various responses to God's invitation to work in the world, to God's invitation to join in God's mission.

Some of those invited fail to see that the reward is not a payoff in the end. It's not money, status, or even heaven. The reward is the invitation to work in the vineyard, to participate in God's life and work in the world.

There are those who say they will work do the work, but don't. And those who say they won't do the work but do. Jesus pointedly juxtaposes here the religious leaders and the people those leaders deem sinners. The religious leaders claim to dedicate themselves to God's teaching and work, but instead deny healing to the sick, silence children, and side with those who take advantage of others.

The so-called sinners, though, listen to and witness what God is doing in the world, and they join in that work. They believe God's messengers and are transformed in response.

And then there's today's parable. The slaves the landowner sends to collect the rent represent the Prophets. Now a brief word about the word "slave" here. Prophets often identified themselves with a word usually translated as "servant" but that could also mean "slave." Mary, likewise, calls herself the servant or slave of the Lord when she accepts the invitation to bear Jesus. Paul also calls himself a servant or slave of God in his letters. In each case, "slave" is meant to signify complete submission to God's will. To the hearers of this parable, the word "slave" would instantly evoke the Prophets, the messengers of God who called for justice and liberation. What was the response to the Prophets? They were beaten, stoned, and killed.

Then God sends the Son, whom the tenants also kill. Here, Jesus is, of course, forecasting his own crucifixion. The thing is the religious leaders know that he is talking about them. But what is their response? It's to start plotting the very thing he chastises them for. They start to plot to kill him. They become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

We've been talking about mission, specifically God's mission and our calling to participate in God's mission. God's mission is a mission of love and reconciliation, but too often we reduce that mission to a Pollyanna "be nice to people" kind of love. Don't get me wrong. We are absolutely called to be kind to one another, but the love we are called to is so much deeper.

The Prophets' message – the message that got them beaten and killed – was a message of love in action. They cried out: Care for the widow and the

orphan! Lift the poor! Feed the hungry! Clothe the naked! Heal the sick! Free the oppressed!

Jesus had the same message. When the religious leaders ask Jesus by what authority he is “doing these things,” recall what “things” they are asking him about. It wasn’t just teaching in the Temple. It was kicking out usurious merchants, overturning moneychangers’ tables, healing the blind and the lame, and defending the joyous shouts of children. Jesus advocated for those who lacked power against those in power.

God’s mission, the mission God invites us into, is not a toothless, idealized love where you can just pat yourself on the back as you say you love others. God’s mission is love in action. God loved creation into being, knitting goodness into everything. When we took things astray, God didn’t just love us from a distance. God got God’s divine hands dirty. God kept giving us new chances, calling us back into relationship. God sent Prophets to call us into love in action. God sent Jesus, God incarnate, to show us love in action and to invite us into it. Even now, God sends us the Holy Spirit everyday to empower and renew us and to set our hearts on fire with love.

On my first Sunday, I said we had places to go and things to do and that we would go to those places and do those things together. This is what we are called to do. We are called to make God’s love manifest, present and tangible, in every corner of creation. We are called to love in action.

That’s a tall order. How are we here at St. John’s supposed to do that? Well, we’re already doing it. It’s in hanging a pride flag outside, countering the narrative that LGBTQ+ people are anything other than profoundly loved by the God who created them in a beautiful rainbow of diversity. It is in the work of the Antiracism Ministry, facing head on how we have benefited from oppression and considering how we can move from sin to reconciliation. It is in gathering for 8 a.m. Morning Prayer, 10 a.m. Sunday services, Thursday night Compline, fellowship group, and much more. There we check-in on and care for one another, lifting those who need a boost. It’s in our lay preachers’ willingness to challenge us to wrestle with and live into the love and liberation of the Gospel. It is in ministries like the Centre Street Food Pantry.

None of this is foreign to St. John’s. It is in this parish’s DNA. It is in what we are already doing. It’s even in our name. I asked Rhy early on which St. John this parish named for. It’s St. John the Evangelist, represented by a flying

eagle. You have adopted for yourselves the name of someone who spread the Gospel to every corner of the earth. And you live into that in your ministry.

No, our work is not done. We will do more. We will take it to the next level. We will invite more people in. We will stand with the oppressed and join their cries for justice. We will carry those who need support. Together, we will proclaim by word and deed God's profound, unshakable love for all people and all creation. And, as the Gospel lesson warns, this is going to make some people mad. There will always be those who oppose the proclaiming of a God who is too loving and a Gospel that is too liberating. Yet, we will continue because it is our calling and because perfect love casts out fear.

This is the work of the Gospel. This is God's mission. This is our mission. And we will do it together.

Amen.