

Beloved Community: Learning Continuously
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan – September 20, 2020

Please Read:
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

In this morning's lectionary Gospel text, Jesus concludes his teaching, "*So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last.*"

Some of us in the church have heard this statement so many times that it has ceased to be as disturbing and disorienting as it might have been to the first hearers. This is one of Jesus' teachings with which most of us would rather *not* have to struggle. But today we are continuing our reflections on the mission statement of our church, and today's topic is "Learning Continuously." The question is, what are we meant to be *learning continuously*?

The way of Jesus represents a challenge to the way we think, and consequently to the way we live our lives and relate with one another. And so I believe there is a certain *way* that we are meant to learn continuously as followers of Jesus Christ.

Philosopher Josef Pieper in his book, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, argues that in the modern world we have turned learning into a mechanized industry. It's a very different approach from learning that took place in the ancient world.... Did you know the word "school" comes from the Greek word, σχολή, which means "leisure"?¹ Plato and Aristotle's pedagogical method required vast amounts of free time free so that one could learn to think and reflect.

Is that the methodology of the best schools today? I did a brief survey of our youth this past week, and they agreed that leisure would *not* define their typical day at New Canaan High! In remembering my college days, I had to question, what do "*all-nighters*" have to do with *leisure*? School in today's world is all about competition and working really hard. The assumption is, the harder you work, the smarter you'll be. Ironically, some people in the news have cheated to help their kids "win" at school. We would do well to remember that Thomas Aquinas once said, "The essence of virtue consists in the good rather than the difficult.

It's a bit of a shock, then, when we come to Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard, and his socially subversive assertion that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

To put it in context, Jesus is continuing to teach about what the kingdom of heaven is like, a theme which runs through the Gospel of Matthew. This particular text might still be in response to the disciples' earlier question in chapter 18, "Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?" Jesus seems to want his followers to learn that the Kingdom of God is not a meritocracy; and welcome into the Kingdom of God it is not about competition or hard work...

Jesus in our parable today teaches us that to follow him means something very different than to follow the common knowledge or wisdom of the world. The world's priorities are not divine priorities. You could say that Jesus' teachings are revolutionary, inviting us to turn toward a different way of thinking and acting in this world. As one of our members has put it rather nicely, it's revolution to evolution!

¹ Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. Trans.by Alexander Dru (Phila: Liberty Fund, 1952), 2.

First of all, let me suggest to you that what we need to be learning continuously, and what *this parable is about, is the scandalous grace of God*. As Thomas Keating comments on this parable, “The invitation of grace to enter the Kingdom of God goes forth again and again and again.”² The vineyard owner ends up going out five different times during the day to recruit workers for his vineyard, even those who no one else would hire, and then at the end of the day he pays them all the same wages. What a generous master! And what a generous God Jesus introduces to his disciples then and now.

Through Jesus Christ we come to know that nothing we do determines the amount of love that God holds out to us. In Galatians, the apostle Paul writes, “We know that a person is put right with God only through faith in Jesus Christ, never by doing... not even by doing what the law requires.”³ The workers received their wages because they agreed to work in the vineyard. *Their wages had nothing to do with how much work they did*. What a generous God we have!

Notice also that the landowner does not only invite the workers who are the strongest, the best trained; the good looking, intelligent types. *God chooses all of us not because of who we are, but because of who God is, the Lord of Love and grace*. “From the human point of view,” Paul points out to the Corinthians, “few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and God chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful.” God will take all of us in, no matter what we may be in the eyes of the world. God will receive us and give us work in the vineyard - and God will give us the benefits of a recreated, redeemed, restored life.

If we continue reading our parable, we find also that this teaching is not only about God, it is about those of us who choose to follow Jesus and work together. This parable gives us a very practical teaching about the divine priority in our relationships. I think this is particularly relevant as we begin new relationships as pastor and congregation, as new people are coming into our community, as we seek to cultivate deeper intimacies in our family lives and in our friendships, and as we continue to define not only who we are but who we will be together as a community that is living spiritually, loving inclusively, and learning continuously.

This teaching about the last being first and the first being last defies all of the socialization that we have undergone since birth. Jesus undermines the great Protestant work ethic. We are trained to study harder, work longer, run faster, build up our bodies to look better... We are programmed to want a bigger piece of life's pie and that if we work harder, we deserve it. We are trained to be competitive. And hey, I like competition as much as anyone, I suppose. It's fun to climb to the top, to win, to be successful and to excel... *until it's not fun*. Until you realize there is a cost, and that sometimes you pay a painful price to “make it to the top.” You notice that some of the workers are a little whiney. They complain. Now I know that never happens in the church... but I think Jesus is simply holding out to us the vision of the Kingdom of God where it is not about some winning and others losing. It's not about achievement at all. It's not about the work of the workers, so much as it is about the generosity of the landowner, who wants to indiscriminately dole out mercy and gifts...

² Thomas Keating, *Meditations on the Parables of Jesus* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 2019), 78.

³ Galatians 2:16ff.

Think about this a little more practically. That means that God's grace is for everyone. The goody-two-shoes, the A type Alpha Dogs as well as the slackers and drifters... and if you want to push this a little further, you might throw in liberals and conservatives, even Democrats and Republicans. Straight and gay; bisexual and transsexual; Majorities and minorities... God wants to bless us all!

Actually, we've already received a lot of grace... Most of us have worked hard to get where we are, but if we're honest, we've caught some good breaks. The genes we inherited, the wealth and influence of our parents. The schools in which we've studied.

The question is, do we acknowledge the grace we've received, and live from grace? Perhaps this is the connection with the Philippians text... What does it mean to "live a life worthy of the gospel?" This is something worth pondering, personally as well as corporately.

Supreme Court Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg died on Friday. This would be a good time to read her biography or watch one of the movies about her life. She was committed to learning, and because of her learning she knew that change was not only necessary, that it was possible. What a difference she made in women's and LGBTQ rights! Her life is a great inspiration to all of us in that with learning and perseverance, you really can make a difference in the world.

One thing I do know about the good news, is that we need to preach it to ourselves daily, and learn it continuously, because if we're going to work in God's vineyard to change the world, it's got to start with us. We can't all be Supreme Court Judges. Mother Teresa once was asked by a devotee who had traveled all the way to meet her in Calcutta and asked her how she might help to change the world? Mother Teresa answered simply, "Go home and love your family." Maybe we make things too complicated? Clearly, any kind of love involves "suffering", but suffering is not the end... Paul states that our goal is to experience "progress and joy in faith."

The expanded version of our mission statement says this: "As a *center for progressive Christianity* we strive to nurture the development of resilient faith and noble values from earliest childhood, through adolescence, to mature adulthood. We are 'a thinking person's church.' We enjoy the challenge of worshipping God with our minds. We believe that all of life's big questions are spiritual, and while there are neither easy nor ready answers, we seek to provide an open forum in which to explore them. We seek to deepen our commitment to the truth of our Christian tradition while at the same time discovering and respecting the truth of others' traditions."

I find this so hopeful. We are a community which values curiosity, questioning and doubt! Paul Tillich taught that doubt is an *essential* part of faith. And so, we are committed to questioning the way things are, and the assumptions behind even our own traditions.

Finally, I want to ask, what is the metric for a well "learned" progressive Christianity? I hope it's a more loving person, a more loving community, a more open and affirming welcome towards the world. If our learning doesn't produce a more loving community, then who cares? There are people who are suffering all around us, and we as the church are God's preferred instrument of healing and hope for the world. To learn continuously means for me to question, "What does the gospel look like in this time and place?" And then commit to living it out.... The

paradox of deepening our commitment to continuously learning about God's grace is that it makes us more loving and respectful, genuinely appreciative and honoring of all people, those like us and those different from us; those with other faith or with no faith at all.

I look forward to learning continuously with you, by God's grace, for years to come. Let's take our time, even enjoy a leisurely pace. This isn't a competition. We are called to receive and share God's grace and work to relieve the suffering of our world, paying special attention to those who are too often overlooked or forgotten. Remember... the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

In the name of the one who is beyond our knowing, but revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and who by the power of the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. Amen.