

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
September 24, 2017

It might surprise you to find out that some churches are more desirable to work at than other. It's a shock, I know. Ministers are called by God to serve wherever they are sent, but it's always amazing to me that more of these seem to be sent into neighborhoods with good schools and to churches with sizeable endowments. The Lord works in strange and mysterious ways, but the Church is fairly predictable.

Our Lutheran brothers and sisters have developed an intriguing response to some of the inequalities inherent in pastor placing. They instituted a three-year-long draft for new pastors who are right out of seminary. After the new seminarians graduate, Lutheran bishops from all over the country get together to sit in a dark room and trade the young pastors to each other like playing cards. I imagine there are lots of cigars and whiskey in these meetings. The newly minted pastors are sent to wherever the church has the greatest need—even if that's in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere or a church that has been ravished by urban blight—to serve a mandatory three years. The idea behind the draft, I believe, is for difficult-to-place churches can receive fresh energy from new graduates while at the same time giving new pastors needed experience. They tell us that the system is wonderful and that everyone wins.

The draft is almost a rite of passage for my Lutheran friends. Everyone does their three years, and you can hear older pastors talking about that time almost like soldiers sharing war stories.

As with most drafts, though, there is a dodge. There is a loophole. If the new pastor is married, and if the spouse has a job, a new pastor can apply to the bishop to restrict herself or himself to just one area of the country. Essentially, if you are married, you can dodge the draft. If you are single, you can't.

I had two friends who went through seminary at the same time—both highly qualified women and pastors. One was married, dodged the draft, and ended up in a church in an up and coming neighborhood on the north side of Chicago, complete with a four bedroom rectory on a beautiful tree-lined street. Another friend, single, ended up being drafted to a dying church in an impoverished coal town in Ohio where she lived in a nasty apartment above a funeral home and had to drive nearly an hour to see a movie. As you may imagine, my Ohio friend was a little bit bitter. She would often tell me, “the draft is unfair.”

I actually think that calling something unfair is another kind of dodge. When the vineyard workers in the parable this morning are complaining that the latecomers got paid the same as they did, they're not really complaining about the fairness of the system. They're saying, “we want to get paid for less work!” “We want that sweet deal that the other guys got.” When my friend complained about being sent to Ohio, she was really saying, “I want the cushy job in Chicago!” “It's not fair,” is just a polite way of telling people that we want, what we want, when we want it. Or, put another way, “It's not fair” is the mission statement of the human condition.

I have some really bad news to deliver this morning, and it is this: we are selfish. All of us. It may be a matter of degrees, but really, we're selfish. We want what we want when we want it. I think Jesus knew this when he was revealing the parable of the workers in the vineyard. A parable is an unveiling—a peeking behind the curtain to see what is real. And Jesus is giving us a glimpse into one of the harder-to-see parts of the human psyche. We want all the pay for none of the work—just like those other guys. There's a reason that coveting your neighbor's donkey and his wife made it into the ten commandments. If we weren't doing it, God wouldn't have had to tell us to stop. When left to our own devices, we have a tendency to look out for number one.

That's not how God really works though. In the Divine economy, the last are first, the weak are strong, the peacemakers are the true warriors. Those are difficult truths for the world to handle because they are so dangerous. When we privilege the peacemakers, then we have to take a hard look at war. When we say that God blesses the poor, we have to take a look at the systems that keep people poor.

The Divine economy is difficult to accept—even for lifelong Christians. Maybe especially for lifelong Christians in a wealthy country. That's why Jesus gives us the parables—to help us see, even when it's murky.

Here's the great scandal of God's economy: Even though we're selfish, even though we moan about this and that. Even though we distrust neighbors and friends in our worst moments. Even then, we are loved by God. When we are being total schmucks, it would seem that we don't deserve that kind of love. And yet, that's precisely when God loves us anyway. That's the Divine economy, and that is the scandal of our Christian faith.

No wonder we want to tell people about Jesus. No wonder we want to spread this good news. If you know something as precious as the love of God for us even when we're not being that great, how can we not tell others about it? This is the Good News that launched a church from twelve rag-tag disciples to the flourishing church we have today. The dead live; the captive is freed; the sinners are loved anyway.

God is showing unlimited love to folks—regardless of how long they've been in the vineyard. And, I believe, God is inviting us to do the same. Amen.