



Fruitful Labor
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (September 24, 2023)

The laborers in Jesus' parable here in Matthew 20 are uncomfortable with the wideness of God's grace. Those laborers who came in the early morning hours grumbled against the landowner because they were paid the same as others who started later and worked fewer hours.

Judging by a score-keeping mentality, they did not find the landowner's practice fair. When they saw that the late-comers were paid the daily wage they themselves were promised, they expected a higher rate for their full-day of work. Their jaw dropped and they got infuriated when the amount they received was the same as the others.

These laborers are ill-at-ease with the landowner's choice "to give to this last the same as I give to you." They are uncomfortable with the unchecked mercy offered by the landowner/God. God doesn't play by our rules, and that can be very discomfoting for us all. Really, what's the point of spending oneself all day if people who only work an hour get the same reward? Few parables disturb people more than this one.

Our discomfort with grace manifests itself in all sorts of ways. It can be discomfoting for us to engage the economically poor and the outcast of our society. It can be discomfoting for us to welcome immigrants into our communities. It can be discomfoting to address the pervasive racism that still surrounds us. And it can be very discomfoting for us to open our lives to the transforming power of the cross of Christ, whereby "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matt. 20:16). Jesus surely upsets our world and scrambles our worldly thinking.

Would you, do you ever curse God's goodness? Has anger against God's "unfairness" ever blinded you? Are you envious because God is

generous? Could it be that the more uncomfortable we become with the reckless love of God, the closer we are to understanding the meaning of grace?

Gentiles can be considered late-comers in the salvific scheme of God. We have not known the Mosaic laws and yet are welcome into God's kingdom by an act of grace and not by any merit of ours. The experience of receiving abundant grace is overwhelming and overshadows whatever personal or social challenge we might be experiencing.

In fact, we may ask: can joy and suffering be experienced at the same time? In the letter to the Philippians, Paul speaks from a place where joy and suffering converge, not in abstract thought, but in a Roman prison where he awaits news of his sentencing, to life or to death. There is joy in spending one's life at the service of the Lord even and especially because of life's trials.

Paul knows he will find a hearing among the Philippians because they, too, have experiences of suffering, anxiety, and deprivation. Roughly a hundred years before this letter was written, Philippi was the site of the final battle of the Roman civil war. When peace was achieved, the farmable land was seized from the local Greek-speaking populace and given to Roman veterans.¹

Paul's letter, written in Greek, is addressed to a community of people who have known and continue to experience economic precariousness and social ostracism. The letter does more than create a bond through mutual suffering; the real point is to share the joy and confidence of solidarity in Christ, while maintaining clear-sighted awareness of their situation. The Christians of the City of Philip face internal as well as external pressures. Will they remain faithful?

To the Roman citizenry of Philippi, the Christians were likely seen as politically provocative. This is the context in which Paul contemplates

¹ Philippi, in northeastern Greece, was a city of some importance in the Roman province of Macedonia. Lying on the great road from the Adriatic coast to Byzantium, the Via Egnatia, and in the midst of rich agricultural plains near the gold deposits of Mt. Pangaeus, it was in Paul's day a Roman town (Acts 16:21), with a Greek-Macedonian population and a small group of Jews (see Acts 16:13). Originally founded in the sixth century B.C. as Krenides by the Thracians, the town was taken over after 360 B.C. by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great, and was renamed for himself, "Philip's City." The area became Roman in the second century B.C. On the plains near Philippi in October 42 B.C., Antony and Octavian decisively defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius, the slayers of Julius Caesar. Octavian (Augustus) later made Philippi a Roman colony and settled many veterans of the Roman armies there.

the poignant ramifications of his death or his release (Philippians 1:21-26).

What is translated in v. 27 “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...” should better be translated “conduct your citizenship...” It is an edgy term to use in writing to a group of people who are, in fact, non-citizens. With the Roman occupation, they have lost their civil rights. The Philippians will be reminded a few chapters later of their heavenly citizenship (Phil 3:20). This new kind of citizenship stands in stark opposition to the citizenship of their Roman neighbors and is Paul’s way of talking about the practical consequences, the specific moral choices, that are consistent with fidelity to the kingdom of God (Phil 1:28).

The moral pattern Paul will set out in Philippians 2:5-11 is the core of the “gospel of Christ” that he mentions here: the willingness to risk oneself entirely for God’s mission to raise up the most vulnerable, a move that appears both foolish and provocative within the cultural norms of Roman Philippi. In this upside-down world, the suffering that the Christ-believers are made to endure is actually evidence of their salvation and future glory, and good reason for rejoicing. In faithful love, no matter the consequences, Christians know the joy of the kingdom.

The beautiful letter to the Philippians is rich in insights into Paul’s theology and his apostolic love and concern for the gospel and his converts. In this letter, Paul reveals his human sensitivity and tenderness, his enthusiasm for Christ as the key to life and death (Phil 1:21), and his deep feeling for those in Christ who dwell in Philippi. With them he shares his hopes and convictions, his anxieties and fears, revealing the total confidence in Christ that constitutes faith (Phil 3:8–10).

As we shall see next week, the letter incorporates a hymn about the salvation that God has brought about through Christ (Phil 2:6–11), applied by Paul to the relations of Christians with one another (Phil 2:1–5). Philippians has been termed “the letter of joy” (Phil 4:4, 10). It is the rejoicing of faith, based on true understanding of Christ’s unique role in

the salvation of all who profess his lordship (Phil 2:11; 3:8–12, 14, 20–21).

Being a Christian is hard!

Jesus seems to lure us away from the enjoyments of life and proposes instead a straight and narrow way.

If Jesus forgives and has mercy also on the late comer to the faith, why rush? Why do not wait until the last minute to heed the call and commit to Jesus? Why not enjoy life until it lasts?

Jesus turns the world upside down. If we decide to be on his holy journey, then we need to come to terms with his values and not the world's. Both Jesus and the world say: follow me. Whom are we going to listen to? Whom are we committing to? Whom are we worshipping?

The world says: "Shop until you drop." Jesus says: "Love until you drop."

The world says: "An eye for an eye." Jesus says: "Forgive."

The world says: "I, me, and mine." Jesus says: "Others."

The world says: "Live it up. There is no tomorrow." Jesus says: "You are invited to God's wedding feast." And "I go ahead of you to prepare a room for you."

The world says: "Sin is fun." Jesus says: "Go and sin no more."

The world says: "If you want to get ahead in the world, you must use power over." Jesus says: "If you want to have equity in the world, use power with."

The world proclaims: "Death." Jesus says: "Resurrection."

Responding to the call, no matter the time of the day or the stage of our life, means enjoying life Jesus's Way. It means living a life in the Spirit. It means trusting the Word of God and learning to see things through God's eyes. It means to learn compassion. It means to be one with God and God's world.

Again, being a Christian is hard.

So, why would we want to be a Christian?

If it is only for the afterlife, then we can wait. Why bother rushing?

But if it is because we have encountered the Lord; if it is because he has looked into our eyes, healed our wounds, and given a new depth to our life; if it is because there is joy in knowing him and sitting at his feet, then why not starting sooner?

As Paul writes, “God has graced (empowered) you not only to believe in Christ but to suffer for him as well” (Philippians 1:29). We, too, have been graced with love, purpose, and forgiveness. We, too, no matter how early in our life we have embraced Christ, are late comers to the faith. May our endurance in the faith show the deep joy that motivates us, the trust in the lordship of Jesus, and the certain hope of the kingdom come. Amen.