

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20, Year A
The Reverend Amelie A. Wilmer
St. John's Episcopal Church

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matthew 20:1-16)

I've always wondered something about the parable of the "generous landowner" from the gospel of Matthew that we have just heard. What if the workers who had come first, who had been working all day for a fair wage, had been paid first and sent on their way without having any knowledge of what the last workers were paid? What if they went home, satisfied from a hard day's work, grateful that the landowner had picked them up that morning and paid them as he said he would? What if they had never had the chance to compare themselves to the others?

Of course the story isn't written that way, and I suppose there is a reason for that! But it really makes me think of all the times in my own life that I've been perfectly content, whether in my place of work, my home, or in my relationships, until I discover what my colleague is being paid for the same work, or what my next door neighbor has just done to her kitchen, or what my friend's son has accomplished at school. Once I begin the business of comparing myself to someone else, the trouble begins. I imagine you understand what I'm talking about.

Why do we do this? Rather than be content with what we have or who we are or what we've accomplished, why do we so regularly look to those around us to decide whether that's enough based on what others have or are or have accomplished?

I suspect this is part of being human. According to what psychologists call the "Social Comparison Theory" this tendency to compare is rooted in our evolution as a species...we

compare ourselves to others in an attempt to make accurate evaluations of ourselves, and as a source of motivation and growth. It seems we cannot get a full sense of ourselves or reach our full potential apart from an external reference.¹

And I get that. If, as a child, I never saw the older kids next door ride a bicycle or hit a baseball or build a treehouse, I might never have been motivated to learn any of those skills. Grammar, numerical operation, playing a musical instrument...all these skills require social comparison. As a woman, I can certainly appreciate the advances being made, however slowly, in wage equality which could only have happened through our willingness to compare with one another.

But there can be a cost to this. While comparison can be a valuable tool for learning and development, and justice, it can also spin us into a tail-chasing frenzy of self-doubt.

Mark Twain once said, “comparison is the death of joy,” and evidently, the science agrees. Researchers have observed what happens when we compare ourselves “upward” – to people who we perceive to have more than we do, and they’ve found that this often breeds feelings of envy, low self-confidence, and depression. It also compromises our ability to trust others.²

Comparing ourselves “downward” also comes at a price. While it sometimes benefits us to consider the lot of those who are less fortunate than we are to feel more grateful for our own situation, this can lead us to take pleasure in someone else’s failures in order to feel adequate, fueling mean-spirited competitiveness instead of collaboration; jealousy versus connection.

Either way, upward or downward, when comparing leads us to devalue ourselves or others we’ve entered dangerous territory....

Like when we enjoy the car we drive...until we see a neighbor with a nicer or newer one. Or, when we’re content in our relationship but wonder if the couple just down the street is happier. We feel good about our children’s grades until we hear about the child who is acing all his or her classes. Or, from the reverse direction – we see where someone else has made a mistake and thank our lucky stars we’re smarter than that. Or we look with a smugness at the dysfunctional life of a friend and conclude it’s really her own fault and are glad we make better choices.

The list could go on, but you get the point. Comparison *is* the death of Joy. Instead, you get envy and resentment and bitterness or, occasionally, a shallow pride because you’ve chosen to make yourself feel better by looking down on someone else. This not only kills joy, but it diminishes the actual, present reality – the goodness or the gifts that we, or the person we’re comparing ourselves to, have been given.

Which brings me back to today’s parable, and how much easier it would have been for the landowner in the story to pay the all-day laborers first, sending them home before they could see what their “less deserving” counterparts received. But no, the landowner *wanted* them to see what kind of vineyard he ran. He wanted them to experience radical generosity. He wanted them to surrender their envy and join the party.

¹<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-comparison-theory>

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniela-tempesta-lcsw/comparing-yourself_b_4441288.html

Jesus tells this parable during a time of increasing tension with his opponents, who are not too keen on the wideness of his mercy, the forgiveness and acceptance he extends to the outcasts and ne'er do wells, the "last", and not the first. The story served to diagnose, if not indict, his opponents' failure to accept Jesus' wider sense of grace.

And this leads to an observation that I think we might all benefit from making. And that is, we tend to identify far more often, and perhaps unconsciously – with the laborers in the story who work all day and who feel taken advantage of, instead of those who have received unexpected and unmerited generosity.

So, there is a question, and a choice that is posed by today's parable and is asked of us regularly: do we take stock of what we think we deserve, or of all the things we've been blessed by that we don't deserve? Do we look for places in our lives characterized by lack and scarcity or do we name and give thanks for places of abundance? Do we reflect on what others have and we do not, or do we delight in the wonder of all that we have been given...things we had no guarantee or right to expect? Do we choose comparisons or do we choose joy?

It should be easy: "comparison is the death of joy," yet we make comparisons all the time out of some deep-seated instinct. I'm not sure exactly how to combat this, but after having wrestled with it in my own life, here are three things I've learned from the wise ones who have walked alongside me.

The first is: Count your blessings. Sounds simple, and you've heard it a hundred times. But there is so much truth in it. Try to start each morning by naming two things for which you are grateful. Start your day, that is, by anchoring yourself in generosity for the actual reality you have been given rather than comparing it to some ideal or mirage.

The second is: take a social media Sabbath at least once a week and turn your devices off an hour before bedtime. Social media is driven by inviting you to keep in touch with, check in with, and on, how everyone else you know is doing. And yet, connectivity turns so quickly into comparisons, and we forget that the pictures and profiles are often somewhat artificial, as we all try to compose a "self" that will impress others. One day a week away from social media can help clear and refresh your mind and spirit and turning off the device at night helps ensure you don't go to sleep with these comparisons on your mind.

The Third: Practice vulnerability. So much of our culture invites us only to show what is strong and successful and put together (which amplified by social media). Yet each of us has broken places; each of us has experienced loss and disappointment; each has moments of fear as well as hope. We live in a time - and perhaps it's always been this way - in which we are afraid of showing what is broken or messy, but also real. (Sometimes I think our broken places are the most real, most human.) But if we can stop pretending and offer our true selves - and be vulnerably honest - we might find others willing to do the same. And it's hard to set up life-draining comparisons when you're being real with each other.

God gives us one another and God give us enough. In today's gospel, each of the workers received a day's wage. Some labored all day...just as they had signed up to do. Others labored for just an hour. But at the end of the day, they *all* received just what they needed: enough. And don't think that Jesus didn't have today's story from Exodus in mind when he told this parable! God gave his people enough manna in the wilderness, enough for their daily bread, regardless of how much or how able they were to gather. No need to compare. God gives enough.

Comparisons *are* the death of joy. Let "enough" be the birth of joy.

Amen