

**Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 20A-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 9.24.23
Exodus 16:2-15, Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, Philippians 121-30, Matthew 20:1-16**

In my family, I am not known for my cooking skills. When my children were growing up, there were many occasions when, if I was overseeing dinner preparations, the call to come to the dinner table was not a bell, but rather the smoke alarm. It became something of a five-minute heads up before dinner. The smoke alarm would go off, doors and windows would be flung open, I or someone close by would grab a chair to stand on to fan the air away from the alarm. Everyone else in the house knew to wait a couple of minutes before coming downstairs. It is not an exaggeration to say that dinner often started with three simple words: What *is* it? To be fair, it wasn't always asked with that inflection. Sometimes, What is *this*? Or, (chew and chew and chew, puzzled), *What* is it? This is exactly what the Israelites wondered when they saw that fine, flaky stuff for the first time. Just a few verses on, they begin to call it *manna*, which, as best as scholars can tell, is actually a fancy word for, *What is it?*

Over in the gospel, Jesus tells a parable that draws a similar response, albeit for very different reasons. In today's description of what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, the specifics of this story are meant to make us sit up and take notice. The inequity of the situation is so wildly obvious, we cannot explain it away. Some workers are hired to work in a vineyard at 9:00 a.m. Others are hired and start working at 12:00 noon. Still others at 3:00 pm. And a final group at 5:00 p.m. And if the fact everyone is paid the same at the end of the day, regardless of whether they worked 2 hours or 4 hours or 7 hours or 10 hours doesn't catch our attention, then Jesus throws in this extra detail: those who started last were paid first, which means that those who worked the longest not only had to stand and wait while everyone else got tended to (stretching their day out even longer), but they saw how all those who came after them were paid for a full day's work. It is no wonder that those who started at 9:00 a.m. and worked a full day would have expected to receive more. This payday methodology doesn't just create tension in the parable, it exacerbates it.

Imagine being tired after a full day's work, hands outstretched to finally receive those hard-earned wages and realizing that the amount is nothing more, nothing less than all those who started hours later. Imagine the confusion with at least a tinge of outrage and anger: *What is this?* (And the companion question, maybe said under their breath, *Where's the rest of it?*) It's a completely different context from that of the Israelites in the wilderness, but the same question, *What is this?*

What are we to make of this pair of readings? They are both filled with genuine complaints and grumbings—complaints and grumbings that have real merit. For the Israelites, newly escaped refugees stuck in no-man's land, their situation is dire. They need food or they will die. Of *course* they are questioning whether or not leaving all they knew behind was a good idea. And in terms of the issues raised by the parable, the question of what is fair for those who work the hardest and longest is also a real concern. (Witness worker strikes in several industries going on right now.) When theologians describe justice according to the Kingdom of Heaven, it typically includes equitable treatment and fair living wages for all.

Neither Exodus nor this parable seem to be about fairness, at least according to our standards. So, *what is it?* What is it that is being revealed about the nature of this God and the Community of Heaven in these readings today? We might have to go back to the beginning. With Exodus, that means back to when God heard the cries of the people of Israel and remembered the covenant. (Thank you to Susan Gaumer who reminded me of those cries a few weeks ago.) God then appeared to Moses in a burning bush, which set off all the other moments that lead to this moment. And now, in the wilderness, God doesn't hear the cries, but rather the complaints. And the complaints of the people in this new situation are just as important as the cries of the people in their previous situation. So going back to the beginning has something to do with remembering or imagining that our cries, our complaints, our heartaches, our quiet joys, our sadnesses, our fears—all that makes up our daily lives are connected with the Heartbeat of the Universe, who is listening and responding.

Parsing out who has complained and who has not complained just doesn't seem to be of interest to this God who listens and responds so generously. But we're still stuck with that indifference to paying everyone according to the normal standards of fairness. Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* wrote an op-ed a few days ago that, unbeknownst to her, provided some insight into the parable. (*New York Times*, 9.22.23) Kimmerer is a plant ecologist, teaching professor and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment in Upstate New York. She teaches at the summer field camp by a lake in the wilderness of the Adirondacks. In the op-ed, she describes how, the past few summers, a female snapping turtle has made her way out of the lake and up the rocky bluff to the dry sand up above, right where the field camp's volleyball court is located, to lay her eggs at night. (They know her because of the particular notching on her back.) And after she lays her eggs and returns to the lake, the students carefully dig up the eggs from the volleyball court and move them, to protect them and to allow for volleyball games to continue.

More recently, a second female turtle came up at night, as well, to the sandy volleyball court. And then another and another, until, she says, a dozen snapping turtles came all the way up from the water, over the rocky bluff, to the sandy area of the court and lodge. And every time eggs from the snapping turtles are laid, each egg is carefully moved to keep them all safe until hatching time. (She and the students surmise that the turtles' normal egg-laying ground has been covered by rising waters and that the turtles are, in effect, climate refugees, heading further upland for a new, safe place to lay their eggs.)

After reading her description of the snapping turtles, the parable cracked open a little bit, from the inside, like the beginning of a hatching. What if the Kingdom of Heaven is like a lakeshore with a rocky bluff and a sandy beach high above. One night, a turtle mother made her way up the bluff to the dry sand of the volleyball court to lay her eggs. The next night, two more turtles made their way up to lay their eggs in the warm, dry sand—just the right environment for cradling their eggs until they were ready to be hatched. The night after that, five more turtles arrived, and the night after that, four more. All laid their eggs in the warm, dry sand of the volleyball court. Each morning, the

field students gently carried the newly-laid eggs to a safe place in the sand, to watch and ensure that the eggs not be disturbed, so that they would hatch. It did not matter which turtles came first or which came last, which eggs were laid first and which were laid last. Those that were laid on the first night and those that were laid on the last night—all of the eggs from all of the turtles were moved and tenderly cared for.

Jesus isn't talking about reversing the line, order, so that it now goes from last to first; so that those who were first are now craning their necks from the back to see what those in front are being paid. There is no more line. No standing around waiting to be hired and then going home at the end of the day to eat, sleep, and just get up to do it again. *What is it* that is before us this morning?

Kimmerer ends her essay, *We humans...are scientists and storytellers, we are change makers, we are Earth shapers riding on the back of the turtle. We are each called upon to resist the forces of destruction, to give our gifts, to first imagine and then enact a world whole and healed. Awe. Wonder. Abundance. Blessing. Beauty. Rain. Nourishment. A covenant with Love itself. An Invitation to come into the Vineyard, to stay in the Vineyard, to use our hands to tenderly and fiercely cultivate the vines and the turtles and all of life as field students, alongside the Vinegrower—to abide in the Vine. Perhaps that's what **it** is.*