

Outdoor Worship with Pet Blessing
Matthew 20:1-16
September 24, 2017

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

As I started to contemplate the Bible passages to be used today this gospel passage was not at the top of the list. In fact, it would have been nowhere to be found on such a list for a worship service that centers on the goodness of God's creation, blessing of pets, and being faithful stewards of all God has entrusted us with.

A couple weeks ago I started a lunch Bible study at Mexico Lindo just down the street. It is a time to eat, talk, and also look ahead to Sunday's gospel passage. Well, without even thinking about it I had already focused the study on the appointed gospel passage just read. Rather than selecting a different text, I decided just to move ahead and could then later pick a different gospel passage more geared to our theme this morning.

However, after reading and reflecting on our text from Matthew a bit it struck me that this is indeed an appropriate passage for today as we gather outdoors and bless the animals we love so much. There is no doubt this passage makes no sense in a consumer driven society such as ours. In order to receive you

must first give. If you want a car you must pay for it and usually speaking, the more you pay the better the car you get. Similarly if you want to receive money you get a job. If you make the same hourly wage as someone else you earn more by working more than that individual. That is why this passage is indeed so challenging. So upside down from what we have been taught and immersed in since the day we were born.

The crux of this passage hinges on, in my opinion, verses 13-15 in which the landowner replies to those workers hired first who were none too happy they received the exact same wage as those hired very late in the day. Hear again those words:

"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?" (NRSV)

The vineyard owner claims the right to pay his workers not on the basis of their merits but rather on the basis of his own compassion. Underlying this entire passage and the kingdom of God Jesus has been ushering in and giving insight into is the Old Testament conception of God the Creator who is good.ⁱ It is the phrase we hear repeatedly in the first account of creation as located in Genesis 1 that "it was good." Just prior to God resting on the Sabbath we hear the words of the

author state this referencing all God created, “And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

The theme of God’s goodness is also found in the Psalms. Take Psalm 145 verse 8 and 9 for instance which states, “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.” Even earlier in Matthew’s gospel Jesus reveled at the magnitude of God’s goodness as he states, “he (God) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” Underlying the compassion and goodness of God is the fact that God is generous to all.

This day, this worship, this setting is all about proclaiming God’s goodness in all of creation. It is about blessing the love of God found in the furry, feathery, or scaly friends we call pets. It is about confessing our failings before God to care for the bounty of God’s goodness and be the faithful stewards God intended humanity to be and then, once again, receiving the abundance of God’s grace through the forgiveness found in the loving arms of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for all. Yes, for all, even those we deem stand outside of that grace. Even those we fear because, on the surface, they appear different than us. Even those we begrudge because their opinion is not our opinion. Yes, each of us is

forced to hear this passage about the all-encompassing grace and goodness of our lavish Creator and reflect on the times and ways in which we have received that grace; but, and here is the hard part we must also reflect on the times and ways we have failed to extend that grace, see that goodness in the other, or become part of or support systems, ideologies, and agendas that run so counter to the kingdom of God we find in today's gospel passage.

We can learn a lot from our furry, fuzzy, feathery, and scaly friends we either brought with us today or left home. Yes, they might be a bit cautious of someone that is new to them; however, once moved beyond this fear they provide us a wonderful example of our gospel story come to reality. They see the other just as another person they can love. Another person who they can play with. Another person who will love them. They don't see black or white. Male or female. Legal resident or illegal immigrant. "Yes" voter or "No" voter. No, they just see a human being and they are ready to share their love unconditionally. Just as they might jump back in our lap, tails wagging, internal motors purring, wings fluttering, and seek our affection even when we may have been too busy to give it, been angry with them because they had an accident on the floor or chewed up our favorite shoe. They are a mirror of the goodness of God looking up at us with those puppy dog eyes, floppy ears, crooked necks, puckered fish

lips, etc. extending love as they were created to do. Unconditional love. They are a reflection of the kingdom of God. Amen.

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare *Interpretation Matthew* (John Knox Press, 1993)