**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC September 24, 2017**

***Generous or Envious***

**September 24, 2017 A Sermon by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**WELCOME**

Good morning, and welcome to worship on this first Sunday of fall, which feels more like the first Sunday of August! I hope you picked up a paper fan on your way into the Sanctuary, and please know that if you find the heat unbearable, you may go to adjacent air-conditioned Bodge Lounge to view this worship service via closed-circuit television. I only ask that you not leave during the sermon, if at all possible, to avoid a stampede.

**THE WITNESS OF ST PAUL**  Philippians 1:21-30.

The key verse in today’s Witness of St Paul occurs about halfway through the paragraph: “Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Isn’t that a beautiful thought, an inspiring vision for living the Christian life?

**THE NOW TESTAMENT WITNESS**

The Now Testament Witness for today is a quotation from William Sloane Coffin’s best-selling book *Credo.* Bill Coffin was a warm and generous man, an inspiring preacher, and a tireless activist for peace and justice. He was Chaplain of Yale University from 1958-1975, which included my three years at Yale Divinity School. After leaving Yale, Bill was Senior Minister of Riverside Church in the City of New York from 1977-1987. He died in 2006 at the age of 81 in VT.

*Jesus is both a mirror to our humanity and a window to divinity, a window revealing as much of God as is given mortal eyes to see. When Christians see Christ empowering the weak, scorning the powerful, healing the wounded, and judging their tormentors, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work.*

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 20:1-16

This is Jesus’ parable, "The Laborers in the Vineyard."

**SERMON**

I think for most Americans, this parable rubs the wrong way. We have fought and continue to fight for equal pay for equal work, and receiving equal pay for un-equal work may strike us as just plain unfair. We may well sympathize with the laborers who work all day and expect that they will receive more compensation than those who worked only an hour or two.

But let’s look at the story another way, to see what else may be going on. When the landowner goes out in the early morning to hire laborers for his vineyard, it’s like kids choosing teams for baseball. The best players are chosen first, and you know who is chosen last, as do I --- the least strong and the least skilled. And this is what happens every time kids choose teams.

In Jesus’ parable, I believe that the strongest and most skilled workers are hired first, as they always are, and then the next strongest and most able, all the way down until 5 pm, when the people with little strength or skill are hired. These last folks had been waiting all day to be hired. They may well have been wondering if they would ever be hired, if they would be able to provide for their families, if they would even be able to feed their families.

So when the landowner says he will hire the last set of workers for an hour, they may have said to themselves and to each other, “Well, an hour’s work and pay is better than nothing at all. And maybe this landowner will hire us again tomorrow, earlier in the day, to work in his vineyard.”

So imagine the last hireds’ great surprise, delight, and perhaps even disbelief when the landowner’s manager pays them a full day’s wages. These last hired would have felt like they won the lottery, had there been a lottery in Jesus’ day.

And all the other workers who were hired after the first group surely were similarly pleased. Their worries about not working enough hours that day and not earning what they needed to live on had suddenly evaporated.

We can imagine how the first group would be upset and even indignant not to be paid more than the other groups of workers. As one of the first group hired complained, they had “borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

However, the landowner doesn’t listen to complaints of perceived injustice, saying, “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 the 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?”

That’s a good question, isn’t it? Are we envious over someone else’s good fortune, when we feel that we are not similarly lucky or similarly blessed? Are we envious and angry, or are we generous and congratulatory? Can we share in another’s unexpected joy and not feel a sense of loss when such joy has not come our way?

Jesus is telling this parable because he wants his followers to become more generous than envious. In the parable Jesus is teaching the Tenth Commandment, the commandment that says, “Thou shall not covet,” not jealously desire what our neighbor has earned or has been given.

But Jesus tells the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard for another reason, an even more important reason, than encouraging us to be generous about material things.

Jesus is not teaching economics with this parable. Do you remember how Jesus begins the parable? Jesus begins the parable by saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.”

Jesus is using economics and envy to teach about the kingdom of heaven, also referred to as the kingdom of God or in modern language, God’s realm.

The generous landowner of the parable is God, who calls us to faithful living. Some of us are called by God early in our lives, and we spend all our days following the teachings of Jesus the best that we can.

Others of us come to our faith later in life, perhaps as young adults or in middle age or as senior citizens. And still others may have what was once called a “deathbed conversion,” finding their faith as they realize they are on their way to meet their Maker.

And the point of the parable is simply this: God loves us all the same. Whether we grew up in the church or joined when we had children or when we were lonely or if we found our faith as we faced a fatal illness, our generous God loves us all the same.

We might feel like the worker in the first group who complains, and say to God, “Don’t we at least deserve some extra credit, some extra love or at the least some recognition, for our lifetime devotion to you?”

And God replies, *(Please remember, this is God speaking, not me.)*

*I love all people the same. But you, who are my lifetime and longtime faithfu,l have had a special blessing: you have had the advantage of your faith to comfort and guide you. You have had the support of the Church to nurture and teach you. You have learned and probably remember Bible stories and the parables of Jesus that have inspired you. You have received the sacrament of baptism and taken part in the life-giving mystery of Communion. Believe me, you have gained more from your faith than you will ever know or can even imagine.*

*So try to be generous rather than envious when you see that I love all people the same. Remember Jesus' parables of The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin as well as The Prodigal Son. It is both human and divine nature to celebrate when the lost are found, and if you were never lost, you have had the rewards and blessing of a life without facing the worry and fear experienced by those who do go astray.*

*As God, I am allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me. You belong to me, and you know it, so try to be generous, as generous as you would like me to be --- to you.*

Amen.

**HYMN OF RESPONSE** *There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy*