**St. David’s Episcopal Church**

Beanblossom, Indiana

Pentecost 17, Proper 20A

September 24, 2023

Sermon by the Rev. Kate Wilson

Exodus 16:2-15Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 Philippians 1:21-30 Matthew 20:1-16

One of my favorite parenting techniques is the Slice and Share. It is one of my favorites because it eliminates one of the least pleasant aspects of parenting: whining.

Most of you know the Slice and Share: One child slices the sweet or food in question; the other child has first pick. **Fair** matters.

This technique may reduce jealousy and whining in one child, but it likely also fosters clinical perfectionism and years of therapy in the other. Therefore, it is critical to switch their roles at every opportunity, and to be able to adapt this technique to three, four or five participants. **Fair** matters.

There are joys and there are stressors in parenting, and you must remain on your toes at all times. The son of an elderly woman said to her over coffee, “You know, Mom, I had a happy childhood!” To which she replied, “I’m sorry I missed that.”

We have plenty of whining and complaining, even threats, in our Old Testament and Gospel readings this morning. People over the centuries have complained and whined when an action is perceived as being unfair.

In the reading from Exodus, the Israelites have about had it with this exhausting trip out of slavery. Their provisions are beginning to dwindle, and they are in fear of starvation.

“If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the cauldrons of meat and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”

There was little to slice and share; the situation was bigger than the remaining piece of cherry pie. Moses and Aaron had to turn to God, as they had from before their return to Egypt. After all, this was God’s idea, for Moses, and his spokesman Aaron, to lead the enslaved Israelites to a land of milk and honey. And like the immigrants loaded onto buses in Texas for places unknown, the promises of good jobs and a future in safety enticed them to climb aboard. Being spared of plagues and deaths of all firstborn, and the parting of a sea fade in memory when hunger rumbles.

So Moses and Aaron are caught in the middle and make two moves: they pray to God, complaining themselves about the complainers, and reminding the crowds that they had signed on willingly for this journey. Yes, promises were made, but we didn’t agree to a particular delivery date. And, by the way, don’t blame us, blame God: it was God’s idea, after all.

God accepts Moses’ and Aaron’s pleas, overlooking their own wishy-washy faithless whining, and provides an abundance of food. The problem of angry Israelites, with an enduring feeling that their lives are not fair, is solved—for now.

Our Gospel about a landowner and a vineyard reminds me of the parking lot at Lowes. Over here, near the road, and under the single tree left standing when this Lowes was built, is a platoon of people, mostly men, with water bottles and wide hats as protection from the sun. They are waiting, waiting, since before dawn, and they don’t know what they are waiting for. Packing up people to move? Helping a do-it-yourself owner converting the driveway to bricks, painting the interior of a store before it is opened? They DO know they will get the lowest payment possible, but it is better than nothing.

So was they situation in our Gospel. The platoon of workers expect to get the usual wage and they are ready to work. Like those workers at Lowes, the usual wage was a denarius, which allowed subsistence living, barely living at all. Still, they, too, are ready. The landowner is facing the time crunch of harvest and hires all those he thinks his crop will need. His product, wine, is safer to drink than the water, and so is a staple. He must not lose a single handful of grapes. But shortly into the day, he realizes that the harvest will not be completed in time. He returns to Lowes parking lot, where the platoon is reduced to a crowd, and hires more workers. Later, he finds a mere cluster of workers, and hires them as well.

Just as with those workers from Lowes parking lot, payment occurs at the end of the job. For this landowner and these workers, that is sunset, making further work impossible. The last workers are paid first; the first workers are paid last. And all are paid the same. We see the problem immediately. I work for an hour and get $50 bucks. You work for nine hours and get $50 bucks.

Fair matters. This may be what the last workers were worth to the landowner, as time became more precious as the hours ticked by. But is it fair to those who worked in the hot sun for nine hours?

Yes, it is fair, because it is the payment they agreed to when they were hired. They may not like it, but the question is about agreements made and nothing else.

That still leaves a bad taste in the mouth, a feeling of being taken advantage of, despite agreeing to it before the sands began to shift under their feet.

It is difficult to let go of this deep feeling of being cheated, isn’t it. It’s sort of the feeling I get when I realize that I earned $7200 a year to teach when I started, and Brown County teachers’ salaries range from $38,000 to $66,000. It doesn’t *seem* fair, but this degree of fairness overlooks many important factors, doesn’t it?

Jesus’ point here is both more subtle and more basic. In his society—as well as in our society—the “first” are those with significant social advantages: position, income, property, race, ethnicity, and above all the expectation of receiving every further advantage their position may avail them. A primary advantage is the ability to block those who aspire to better lives. The “last” are those who live at subsistence levels: healthcare workers, farmworkers, those physically or mentally unable to work, people who are “not us.” What our nation’s founders actually called “the waste people”, people who are merely waste, trash.

They have been last, they are last, they always will be last.

We can easily and justifiably expand the understanding of “the last” to all those who are outcasts. Jesus is saying that these will be first in line when it comes to the embrace of God. Not only can you not take your wealth and your superiority with you, you can’t use it to bargain for the embrace of God. Offered to all, the embrace of God gathers in those who love as God has loved. Offered to all, the trappings of life do not entitle us to that embrace. Offered to all, the trappings of life may even bar us from the embrace. It is, as always, about the love you give, the love you act, the love you breathe.

Thanks be to God.