

SERMON for October 1, 2023
Centre Congregational Church, UCC

Matthew 20: 1-16

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

20 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

3 “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ **5** So they went.

“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. **6** About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

7 “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

8 “When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’

9 “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. **10** So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. **11** When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. **12** ‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

13 “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?’ **14** Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. **15** Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

16 “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

To be of use. BY MARGE PIERCY

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals

bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

SERMON

Quoting Ouarannia Emmanouli I read:

“This river runs dark brown. It is stained with tannins and I struggle to see more than a foot beneath the surface. My back rests against a eucalypt(us tree) that is rooted into the riverbank, branches reaching across the water, leaves brushing the flowing stream. The breath of the river touches my face...and the whole city seems to exhale..”¹

This is the first paragraph of an article written by a young Australian woman at the passing of a law in Australia recognizing the Yarra River as a single, living integrated entity. She writes...”it comes after decades of advocacy of people who love the river and signals a movement toward a much older knowing...(telling) an old story about keeping the river and its relatives –the eagle, the crow and the indigenous people alive.”

¹ Kinship: Belonging in a World of Relations, Part Three, Center for Humans and Nature Press, 2021.

As I read this news—imagine a river and its watershed creatures having rights!...I think of the Lakota women I met --Madonna Thunder Hawk and her daughter Marcell Gilbert who tell and tell and tell again the stories of living by the Missouri River before the Garrison Dam was built in 1962. Living along the riverbank, they had rich soil where they had farmed for centuries.. Beans corn and squash...the beans climbing the corn stalks and the squash spreading to protect the ground underneath-- in right relationship. When the dam was built, Oahe Lake was created---the fourth largest in the US--a huge reservoir reaching north 231 miles into the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota.

Ironically, it was that lake or reservoir which was the focus of the 2016 Standing Rock protests which focused on the dangers of running a pipeline under the river and into the lake and into sacred burial sites on the other side. Representatives of 200 indigenous tribes who had not been united (or together for that matter) for over 150 years came to peacefully protest and set up an encampment.

It was a moment not unlike the passing of the law in Australia giving a river “rights” one in which “a mighty river” of indigenous people and settlers came together for the protection of the earth.

Some of you know that for seven years I traveled with local youth to work with Lakota children so I had heard the stories again and again, of how much had changed when the dam had been built and how, now again, the homelands of indigenous people were being threatened.

In October 2016, a call went around to clergy in the US and more than 600 of us travelled to Standing Rock. We stood in a line with our robes---mostly Christian but Buddhists and Muslims, of all races and nationalities, for the sake of the river, for indigenous people whose lands were once again being invaded and for the sake of thousands of people downstream --Americans of all stripes whose source of water was being threatened by the Dakota pipeline.

You can tell this was a turning point in my life and in my understanding of the relationship of water and nature to our own ways of life. I travelled with Bishop Dwayne Royster, an African American pastor from Washington DC and we were met by an indigenous leader of PICO --which is now called Faith in Action – and taken to an auditorium where clergy were gathered and oriented. There I sat between a Unitarian minister and an elderly Episcopalian priest who was himself Lakota to be prepared for what might be an unpredictable day.

As it turned out, the morning of our protest was still and misty. We gathered early around the central campfire for a water ceremony and then walked to the river where we stood for two hours—each blessed by sacred smoke by

indigenous leaders as we arrived at the river. The very presence of hundreds of clergy was carried nationwide in news outlets and I believe helped gain the attention of then President Obama who stopped the construction of the pipeline a few weeks later. When Trump was elected he lifted the ban and the pipeline has gone forward. There have already, as predicted, been two significant leaks releasing oil into the river and costing millions in clean up, affecting thousands of people downstream, indigenous and non alike.

The morning after the clergy protest, I returned to the encampment, as people here in Brattleboro had sent and boxes of cedar for the fire, with money to buy food and supplies and with suitcases full of jackets and hats-- as it was November and the weather was turning. Beyond these deliveries, I had one more day to help.

I had been filled with inspiration by what I saw as amazing and very peaceful encampment—no guns no drugs or alcohol and, as I drove there, I girded myself--imagining going with many others to the riverbank to stand up against the Army National Guard. There were reports of rubber bullets wounding protesters and I believed I was brave enough to risk it.

But, as God would have it, and, before I could even orient myself, the same young indigenous man who had greeted me at the airport seemed to appear from nowhere to take me to his encampment...and, of course, I still thought that would be my change to risk my life for the sake of the river and its community.

He introduced me around and specifically to an older woman—that is, a woman my age !, © and she put me to work cutting up a buffalo for a stew they were making. I spent the day -not at the river itself - but making stew and organizing canned goods and handing pickles and refreshments to the teenagers who, it turned out were, the ones sent to the cold river for protest. It was clear I was not the one to stand in the river ...but I was “of use”.

I tell this story because it has so much to do with the poem...

“The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.”

I think of this again and again and of how humbling and wonderful it was to be put immediately to work, if not, in the way I had imagined...

If nothing else, I hope these past few weeks of the season of Creation have moved you to appreciate our relationship with the natural world and, in particular, with the Connecticut watershed. “**Mitakuye Oyasin**” was the first Lakota phrase I ever learned. “We are One” said an elder to me on the very first

day—we are related---it was a welcome of sorts to the reservation but it came to mean something so much more--- “we are related” -I came to learn-- meant a relationship with Lakota people but also with the prairie lands and sunflowers, the groundhogs and prairie chickens, the wild radish and most especially with the river. I can imagine World Communion now in a new way.

This week Bill McCarty hung up the flags from the countries mentioned in the insert and I realized when I saw them that they reminded me of Standing Rock where people from all these nations and more flew flags in solidarity.

Since its inception World Communion Sunday has come to mean far more than a Christian communion and the table we share has come to mean a connection with the very bread and wine we are so fortunate to take, eat and drink together. I sometimes think Jesus gave us a puzzle in the eucharist that we are only slowly able to fully understand.

Each taking just what we need
In gratitude for the earth and its bounty
For those who knead the bread and pick the grapes
For the sand fired into bottles
And earth molded into the pitchers from which we drink
Mitayuke Oyake...We are one..and it is worth celebrating.

The gospel reading today also reminds us of
God’s generosity and compassion in calling us together as relations
And to the heart of communion
“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.
He calls us out of the Marketplace and into that primordial garden

Who knows why one is late and other other early
Why one is slow and another on the mark
But ,He cautions us,
We are one in the laboring
One in the loving
One in the sharing of the pleasures
And the losses.

Let us pray:

God of hope and healing
May your Rivers of Righteousness
Wash away our apathy, our greed and selfishness
and reveal the deep relationships
You created for us with all creation.

Nourish us with the water of life that restores,
turning deserts of despair into oases of hope.

May the waves of Your embrace
Transform us back into guardians of Your creation.

May the currents of Your justice
Carry us to Your lagoon of peace
Where all creation may enjoy
Life in abundance.

We pray in the name of the one who came
so that the whole cosmos may have everlasting life,
Jesus the Christ,
Amen.