

Those of you who have been in the Christ Church building may remember seeing the “Hall of Rectors” in the area leading back to the Sacristy. On the wall in that hallway are some wonderful old historic photos of the original Christ Church building, along with photos of every priest from the church’s founding in 1883 to the present. I remember when I first came to our Shared Ministry back in 2012 how impressed I was with all that history on display.

But I confess it also brought back memories of another church that had a similar display back in Massachusetts. On its wall were pictures of all its Rectors who had served it over the past 150 or so years – only in this case, in a very rarely-used space upstairs in an area of the building almost no one visited. I asked once about this less-than-prominent placement for the photos of former rectors. I was told what I’m going to call “the official version”: The pictures were moved when the parish hall was remodeled and it was felt the frames didn’t go well with the new décor. But then was whispered to me the “real reason”: One of the more recent priests had been asked to leave, and people felt uncomfortable seeing his picture staring them in the face every time they came to church. And so it was that *all* the clergy who had served that church – including some who had been exemplary priests, well-loved by all, were banished to the seldom-used corridor on the second floor.

I tell this story in reference to the parable we’ve all just heard, the story Jesus tells of the grumbling laborers in the vineyard. What happens in many churches is somehow prefigured by what happens in this story. Someone feels slighted, someone feels ignored, or short-changed, and the grumbling begins. At first, it all happens underneath the surface. Rumors develop. Stories are told. Then, value judgments begin taking shape, and the next thing you know, it all begins bubbling out into the open.

Look at those laborers in the story. You can hear them now: “This isn’t fair. I was here long before this Johnny-come-lately – why’s he being paid as much as me?” Isn’t it true? Look at the times church members operate on the assumption that those who have been around the longest deserve the most respect? “Surely all those years of loyalty are worth *something*.”

But, you see, churches aren’t made up entirely of people whose membership is of long standing. Every church also has in its membership, as we do, people who have just arrived. People who just moved to the area last year, or just rediscovered the Church

years after becoming inactive or attending their spouse's church or...well, you know all the reasons new folks grace us with their presence.

Just as in the parable that Jesus told, there are some in our midst who have been here but a short time. Perhaps even there are some on Zoom with us [today] who are watching for the first time. What's our attitude toward these newer folk called to be?

Praise God, I can think of any number of newer members whose presence is deeply honored, and who have garnered every bit as much respect from our communities as people who have been here since Adam was a child. Our Treasurer at Christ Church, for example, Mara Duffis, came to us but two or three years ago. Janice Butler, who has "jumped right in" in any number of ways (she was our lector [earlier this] [last] evening), is a valued member of our Bishop's Committee, though she only transferred into Trinity Church recently.

In many churches, it would take years before people of such new standing would be invited into positions of responsibility. But does *official* welcome translate into *real* welcome? That's a question every church needs to answer for itself, not just once, but continually. We'd like to think we welcome all – without exception – with open arms, extravagantly. But I don't know of a congregation *anywhere* that can't unintentionally fall into patterns that characterize a "closed community."

Please don't get me wrong. I do not mention this accusingly. I do not mention it out of a perception that, in fact, we are failing on this point. I happen to believe our hearts *are* in the right place and that our newer members *do* feel welcome. But we can never take our answers for granted.

Today's parable comes in the context of a series of parables, all of which are about the life the Realm of God. You and I cannot make that big a dent in the direction of that whole Realm – but we can make a difference in this little corner of it here on the Seacoast. And so, this parable, like the ones before it, asks something of our church leadership. If we are here, preaching a message of grace, we had better be planting a *community* of grace. If we are called to be

- a community of rejoicing,
- a community of reconciliation,
- a community of forgiveness,
- a community of peace,

we need to come to grips with all those traces of human resentment and struggle that keep us from living out the call that has been made to us.

It is difficult being a community that operates with Jesus' teaching as its guide. There are times when it means we're going to have to carry a cross. We're going to be faced with tough decisions and challenging opportunities. We're also going to have to be a community that can stick its neck out and take a risk. This pandemic time is surely one of those moments.

Human reason tells us, more often than not, that a time like this is one in which it is terribly tempting to say, "we can't do it." We can't imagine being the kind of Church this new challenge places before us. How are we going to survive, small as we are, when a dread disease stalks us – especially when so many of us are older and vulnerable to getting it?

But, in the end, we have to recall, we're not called to be people of safe retreat – people who say, "it can't be done," and then, in self-fulfilling prophecy prove it by our inaction. We're called to be people who embrace *faith*. And faith will always take us beyond our human boundaries and understandings, beyond the "easy answers."

So, today, I ask us to renew our commitment to being like Jesus. To get out there and keep inviting people into the vineyard. To make the vineyard one they're going to *want* to be a part of – one in which their contribution, their participation, will be just as valued as that of people who have been with us for 20 or 50 or 65 years. We'll head out "throughout the day" – but will offer the same Gospel to those who arrive "just before the last hour" as we have been blessed with it all our lives.

To my mind, that remains the compelling reason for us to keep moving forward and not lose heart. If we lose *this* vision, we will surely stagnate – and turn into a community as irrelevant to the world passing by as that dusty row of pictures in a second-floor corridor. We're not history! We're the present – God's tough, willing, committed church of the present moment and the present reality.

And, my friends, this is my faith: We will make it – and emerge stronger and even more faithful as we invite among us the next folks who will join our journey.