

**St. Paul's Anglican Church
Septuagesima, Matt 20:1-16
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The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar attacked Israel in 605 BC taking the prophet Daniel and other prominent citizens to Babylon; in 597 when he took their rebellious king Jehoiachin, the prophet Ezekiel and many others captive; and in 586 BC, when he destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem. It was during Ezekiel's exile in Babylon, but before the destruction of Jerusalem, that God called him to be a prophet. It seems many people expected a quick return of their captive king who would continue to rule them. In our Old Testament reading (Ezek. 3:4-11), Ezekiel was tasked with setting the record straight by clarifying God's intentions.

God told him **go to the house of Israel, and speak my words unto them.** They could not grasp the concept that God was not happy with them because of their disobedience. In just a few years, Nebuchadnezzar will destroy Jerusalem, but instead of seeking forgiveness, they continue sinning, expecting God to restore the status quo with no change on their part.

God did not sugar-coat the difficulty in this call to Ezekiel, telling him he would be more successful if he had been sent to a foreign nation where a strange language was spoken. God said, **the house of Israel will not listen to you, for they will not listen to me.** He said words similar to what our parents (or our spouse) meant when they scolded us saying, "I may as well talk to a brick wall, because you aren't listening!" But here is the point for us; God said "Go to them, **whether they will hear, or whether they will not.**" Go to them and speak my truth!

God sent Ezekiel to speak his truth to Israel; and though we can and should learn from his warning, (especially if we expect Him to "fix everything" in spite of our disobedience and refusal to seek his forgiveness), but this warning is primarily a message to

the disobedient Jewish people of that time. In our gospel reading (Matt. 20:1-16) Jesus is again speaking to the Jewish people who do not quite understand God's intentions, but our Lord's teaching through the parable of the workers in the vineyard, is totally relevant to all of God's people, in all times.

As He did in last week's gospel reading, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a fictional, but practical earthly experience. He said the owner of a vineyard **went early in the morning to hire laborers, and when he had agreed to pay them a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.** (A penny represents the normal daily pay for a laborer in those days.) He went back to the place where those desiring work congregated at 9 am, noon and 3 pm and each time he found and hired more seekers, promising them **whatever is right, that you shall receive.**

When the work day ended, he instructed his chief financial officer to pay all the workers, beginning with the last ones hired. To their shock and disbelief, all the laborers received the same pay. Listen to the complaint, **these last have worked but one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and heat of the day.**

This is not an example of a sound business practice; this is not a fair, and maybe not even an ethical way to treat employees. But our Lord is not teaching Business Management 101; He is teaching Heavenly Rewards 101; He is teaching us about God's love. The only wage we can earn from God is punishment for our sins; but through his grace, all who have faith in his Son are granted the highest wage possible, that of eternal life.

Our denomination or the means in which we serve our Lord is not most important. Our salvation is not dependent upon how long we have worked in God's vineyard or the length and quality of our service to Him. What does matter, is that when the Holy Spirit called us, and we answered with faith, God agreed to "pay" us a one-way ticket on the "express bus" to heaven when our service to Him is completed in this life.

When we receive an awesome gift from someone, we want to show our appreciation. A ticket on heaven's express bus is the greatest gift anyone can receive, and we are not capable of returning such an undeserved favor, but we can show appreciation by obeying God's admonition to Ezekiel to faithfully speak God's truth **whether they will hear, or whether they will not!**

When, through our faith, we accepted the Holy Spirit's call to serve God, we were not handed the ability to always be faithful to our Lord. We need to develop the stamina and discipline to maintain and improve our Christian witness. This concept is especially appropriate as we enter the Lenten Season.

The need to develop and maintain a consistent and disciplined approach to serving God is what Paul spoke about in the epistle (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). He compared it to the preparation necessary for athletes to be successful in running races and fighting. They must undergo consistent training and practice if they are to master their chosen athletic event.

But unlike winning a race or a boxing match where there is only one winner, and the prize is temporary, Paul said we are working for an **incorruptible crown** called everlasting life, and all who believe in Jesus Christ can win. Paul gave us a good example by faithfully and humbly serving God from the time of his conversion to faith in Jesus, until the day he was executed for that faith many years later.

Through our faith, we have already won the crown of eternal life; now we must develop the discipline, self-control and endurance worthy of our salvation. The challenge for us is how can we practice this discipline in a practical way as individual Christians, and, as the Parish of St. Paul's?

The Christian Church often faces a hostile environment in our society today and many people say organized religion is no longer relevant because they have established their own morality and do not understand the need to embrace all of Jesus' teaching. In spite of this, our membership has been consistent, but Jesus did

not command consistency, but growth when He said **make disciples, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded.**

We seek to grow in order to share God's gift of eternal life, in order to spiritually feed those seeking a closer walk with our Lord, and in order to better feed the hungry and heal the sick as He commanded. We seek to provide a safe haven where God's Word is honored. So, we must continue to offer an invitation to join us **whether they will hear, or whether they will not!**

And when God sends his people to us, how do we make them feel welcome; what can we do to nourish the feeling in their heart that they are "home," as many of us felt on our first visit? We really do a pretty good job of this, but can we do better?

After the January clergy meeting in Florida, Linda and I spent a few days in Charleston, SC. And every time you go there, you must visit the incredible Historic Charleston City Market. As we entered the very first building, at the very first stall, I saw a man wearing a ball cap that indicated he is an Army Veteran. I told him I liked his hat; he saw my new fleece jacket with army insignia that Linda gave for my birthday, and said, "I like your jacket."

We only spent a few minutes talking "Army stuff", but when we parted it was with hugs and "God Bless You My Brother". We were new best friends; but what connected us? We did not share the same hometown, or race, and probably not denomination; our military service was our initial bond.

When God sends people through our doors for the very first time, it must be immediately apparent to them that we share the deepest and longest lasting bond imaginable. It does not matter whether they, or we who greet them, are life-long Christians, new believers or just searching for something not knowing what it is; we have a spiritual connection; and we must convey that feeling.

And when we part at the end of our time together, it must be with hugs, either physical or spiritual, and with the words, God Bless you my sister; God Bless you my brother; welcome home!"

Now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all might, majesty, power, dominion, and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.