

Help Wanted

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning with Communion
The 3rd Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
March 4, 2018
Text: Matthew 20:1-16

I have felt the touch of Jesus in my life this week, big time. I am one of those people who prays every day, without fail. That's probably no surprise. I'm also one of those people who says "thank you, Jesus" when the traffic light stays green long enough for me to make the light, or when there's no traffic coming at a busy intersection when I need to make a left turn. I'm one of those people who looks for God's active presence in my life routinely so it's no surprise that I find it there often. Perhaps I am just more in tune with knowing what to look for. Perhaps I am prone to do this because of decades of reading and praying, meditating and reflecting on the actions of God in my life. But even I was blown away by the miracles God revealed in my life over these past two days. Let me explain a little.

We had a bit of a storm this past weekend, right?? Well, our church was also hosting an event this weekend – the Kingian Nonviolence Training, Friday evening and Saturday during the day. My friend Sharon (she was one of the presenters) and I kept checking the weather and while it sounded bad, it didn't sound impossible. For various reasons neither she nor I wanted to cancel. In fact we both felt, strongly, that we couldn't cancel. So

we forged ahead, right into the jaws of a major Nor'easter. Now, you know what the weather was like. Awful barely covers it. And yet, truly, I barely noticed it and neither did Sharon or Jonathan her co-presenter nor any of our participants. Something was compelling us forward so forward we went and we watched the miracles unfold together.

Let me tell you about these miracles:

- 1) Not one, NOT ONE, of our participants cancelled because of the storm. Everyone – there were 10 of us – came on time and ready to engage with the materials together.
- 2) Driving conditions were terrible and several of us were driving some distance to get to the church. I was coming from the Providence area, Jonathan was coming from Woonsocket, Sharon lives in Narragansett and one of our participants came from South Kingstown. Everyone else was more local, but still, you know what driving conditions were like. Not one of us was late. Not one of us encountered unsurmountable obstacles to driving here. God cleared the road for each of us.
- 3) The church didn't lose power. This was the biggest miracle of all to me. As you know there were pockets of power outages all around the church but we didn't lose power. And, the only leaks in the building were around the windows in the office. Not anywhere else. In this building. Wow.

4) The restaurant I was counting on to do the meals – Pizza Place in Westerly – didn't lose power either. So, I was able to brave the storm and get dinner on Friday night and lunch yesterday, no problem. Another miracle.

Let me say, I cannot explain to you in words how I was feeling throughout all of this. I would think – what if the power goes out. But I just *knew* it wouldn't. And it didn't. It didn't even occur to me that Pizza Place might have lost power. Then as I'm waiting to pick up the pizzas for Friday evening I heard the cashier at Take-Out telling the person in front of me that their power had flickered several times but never went out and they were surprised. But I wasn't. Thank you, Jesus.

So by now you are probably wondering why I felt as strongly as I did that somehow this training would come off, had to come off. At the time, I couldn't have told you. I was concentrating too hard on just making it through. After all, I had taken this training before, just a few months ago with the UCC clergy in RI. It was incredible which is why I felt so strongly we needed to offer it in this area. I had hoped more of the local clergy would come. No such luck. But I now know that the people whom God intended to be here were here, and ready to fully engage. Most of us had had the training before yet going through it again at the most basic level provided time and space for deep conversation, for a sense of renewal, hope and purpose in this crazy world we live in. As the

storm raged outside, we barely noticed as we engaged together in understanding anew how conflict happens, what violence is and why it is so quick to rear its head in our lives and in our communities. We learned anew Rev. Dr. King's six principles of nonviolence and how they are simply miraculous in addressing deep divisions that lead to conflict and ultimately violence.

I won't even attempt to summarize eight hours' worth of material into a minute or two here. That would not do it justice. If enough folks are interested, we can sponsor one here again and perhaps a sermon series on the six principles of nonviolence might be in our future. But, what I will do is explain one key element of the training because this is how it connects to the scripture text we read this morning. That key idea is that there is always a reason for conflict. There is always a trigger for violence. It is part of the human experience and always will be. We are hard-wired to fight, flight or freeze when conflict arises. But these basic elemental responses are not enough. We must learn how they function in our bodies and brains and we must learn how to transcend them, especially as people of God, in order to be active partners with God in the establishment of the Beloved Community – God's realm here on earth, not in some heaven light years away as the hymn we sing sometimes says.

One of the biggest sources of conflict has been, and will continue to be, economic inequality. The simple truth is that

some people have a lot and others have barely enough, or not enough to live on. This means some people are always scrounging for even the basics of food and shelter, clothing and medicine. Life is literally a battle and sometimes it seems as though the deck is stacked against them. This is exactly the situation Jesus is addressing in this parable of the workers in the vineyard which we read this morning. This familiar parable about workers hired at different times of the day to work in a vineyard yet all paid the same at the end of the day is about economic justice, pure simple. The owner of the vineyard *chooses* to pay the workers hired last at almost the end of the day the same as he paid the workers hired early in the morning. The owner knew how much those folks needed the money. He knew the workers he hired first who had worked all day would be angry. But he did it anyway, because it was the right thing to do. His decision didn't follow the "rules" of a full day's work for a full day's wage. This is why those hired early in the day were furious. But the owner reminded them the money was his to do with as he saw fit, and since he had paid them as agreed, why did they think they had any right to be angry if he chose to be generous?

This is a radical statement revealing how Jesus felt about economic inequality. It's worth noting that this parable has been interpreted for centuries, millennia even, as referring only to access to the kingdom of heaven after death. No matter when in

your life you come to Jesus, you get full entrance into heaven, is what many will insist this parable refers to. But what if it's not just that. What if it's not that at all. What if Jesus meant to address the issue of economic inequality head on as he saw people suffering, not because they weren't willing to work but because the deck was continually stacked against them.

This parable has given rise, in the mid 20th century, to one of the most powerful new theological movements since the earliest days of the church. Originating in the so-called "base camps" of Catholic worker organizers in Latin America, this theological movement – called Liberation Theology – makes the bold argument that Jesus was about life here and now, not just in the afterlife. Jesus wanted everyone to be able to love God and love each other more fully because their bellies were full of food and they could go home at night to a safe place to rest and sleep and reconnect with loved ones. Jesus, dear friends, wanted his followers and all who heard his message to be able to have life and have it abundantly in this life as well as the next. And that is what he is telling us in this parable which turns the rules of the labor market on its head. Everyone deserves a living wage, Jesus said then and still today.

So why are we talking about this today? Simple. Our Lenten focus is on the issue of housing insecurity – homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. This very real problem means that

hard-working people literally do not make enough money to have a place to sleep at night, or if they do, it takes all of their money to do so. That means not enough money for clothing, for medicines needed, even for food. Do you realize that approximately 65% of the people who come to food pantries are working? And the remaining 35% are mostly elderly people whose pensions don't provide enough to live on either. The simple truth, dear friends, is that economic injustice is rife in our country these days. And its not because poor people are lazy or because illegal immigrants are somehow taking jobs away from citizens. Economic injustice is alive and well in our lives because the powers that be want it that way. They have the money, and the power. Simply put, they don't want to share. So the problem remains. And this problem – lack of a decent, affordable place to live for far too many people, many of them children and the elderly – is a foundation stone on which conflict, conflict that too often leads to violence, is built.

We in the church are called to do more than just sit on the sidelines and watch the problems unfold as economic injustice rolls forward. The Bible is clear on that. Very clear on that. Beginning in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament and the most holy of Jewish writings, it is stated over and over again that those with the means to care for the widow and orphan, those at the margins, are obligated to do so. This theme carries on through the history writings, the wisdom writings and the

prophets. Over and over again, care for the widows and the orphans, care for the poor. So too in the writings of the New Testament like we read today. This parable is certainly the most forceful on the theme but there are others as well, not to mention Jesus and the disciples teaching directly to care for the poor, teaching that God loves everyone and wants everyone, *everyone*, to have a good life. That means working with the poor to lift them up out of poverty is everyone's responsibility. That means understanding that some people need more help than others and that's okay.

Dear friends, as we continue our journey of self-reflection through Lent, I urge you to do the hard work of thinking about the reality of poverty through the lens of this parable of the workers in the vineyard. Remember that Jesus' definition of fair is not our definition. Jesus does not say "you get what you work for." Jesus says through the words of the vineyard owner, "I choose to give this last the same as I give to you and that is my right." Jesus reminds us we have a right to be kind and generous. We have a right to help. Nowhere does he say we have a right *not* to help. The thing is, it's up to us to actually do it. Remember, miracles happen every day – if we let them. And each of us can be someone else's miracle. Now there's an exciting thought! Amen.