

HONORING THE DIFFERENCES

March 22, 1990

Susan E. Davies

TEXT: Matthew 20: 1-15

For the realm of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for the vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius, the usual daily wage, the landowner sent them into the vineyard. And going out about the third hour the landowner saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, the landowner did the same. And about the eleventh hour the landowner went out and found others standing around and said to them, "Why do you stand here idle all day?" They answered, "Because no one has hired us." The landowner said to them, "You also go into the vineyard."

And when evening came the owner of the vineyard said to the steward, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But the landowner replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or is your eye evil because I am generous?"

How do we live in community when we are not treated equally?

How do we treat one another when God does not follow the rules?

How do we live so that difference does not divide?

I have worried about this passage for weeks. The point seems too obvious. The grace of God is no respecter of persons. It is not dependent on how much we work, or when we were hired, or where we stood in the line. It does not depend on whether we are part of the Mayflower crowd or the people on the migrant worker's bus, laboring from Florida to Maine and back each year

to pick fruits and vegetables for the rest of us to eat. God's grace does not depend on the color of our skin or our sexuality or our physical abilities. Of course. I've heard that talk all my life.

I have also struggled with this parable because the image of God as the great capitalist landowner in the sky, hiring each of us individually, and dealing with us in an arbitrary fashion, is not an image which I find liberating, nor does it promote solidarity among the individuals and peoples of the earth.

But at an even deeper level, the parable offends because it addresses the way I interpret the world, the way we all develop expectations of our place in the world. It undermines all the rules of fairness and equity I have learned in this society, as well as the rights and privileges I have taken for granted. It requires a restoration of each person to a place of standing within the community, and reminds me that my expectations of justice must be built on that foundation.

If I were to place myself in the story in a world made up of men and women, straight and gay, temporarily able-bodied and disabled, peoples of color, third world peoples and European peoples, the employed, the unemployed and the underemployed, I would be one of those hired between the third and the sixth hours. As a white North American woman, who by background, education and profession is a member of the middle strata, I stand fairly near the front of the line, but not in front of the white men. I'm not among those who have borne the privilege of

immediate employment, nor the full burden of the day, although I've had a share of the scorching heat.

If, however, I change the universe of those waiting to be hired for daily or hourly wages, and make it the universe of women, then I move up to the head of the line. As a white UCC seminary professor who owns her own home, I rank at the front of the line, smack dab in the middle of those who turn God's promises into our own privileges and God's commandments into the instruments of self-sanctification. As long as I dress appropriately, and speak in the correct manner, I can pass as an acceptable person who maintains the established order, and my place at the head of the line is assured.

Then again, if I look at myself as a survivor of sexual abuse, I move to another place in the hiring progression. I'm down there with the ninth, or perhaps even with the eleventh hour people, those who, because of violence and oppression are among the last to learn how to play, to laugh, to experience childhood's wonder. *I was 42 before I played with a rubber duckie.*

How I see myself in the line, how I experience my social location, as first or second, or last, largely determines how I respond to this parable.

For example, when I see high school and college women playing competitive sports in school athletic programs, I am delighted for them, and rejoice with them in their strength and skill and grace. I am also more than a little jealous, because I went to midwestern public schools in the 40s and 50s when women's rules meant only half-court basketball.

We had no competitive teams then, except swimming, golf and tennis, all of which were individual sports, played at best on an intramural level. My generation was told that we shouldn't strain ourselves because we would have trouble with childbearing. At the same time my sisters were straining against the hoe and the pinch and the knife as farm workers. We were told we shouldn't bounce our breasts around nor engage in any sort of contact sport because we might get cancer, while my sisters were living on garbage dumps in Cairo.

And also at the same time, one of my friends, Susan Maloney, who would have made a perfect center even in these days of six foot tall women, had 7 inches of bone sliced out of both her legs. Her mother was worried that she would be too tall to find a husband, and the doctors recommended surgery.

When the Maine women's basketball team made it to the National Invitational Tournament by defeating BU, they received not just one, but what seemed to me to be two denarii for their labor, and they had not borne the burden of the day. For in that hour I remembered Susan Maloney, and my eye was evil.

In the story, everyone receives the same pay, no matter how long or hard their labor. When that happens, our understanding of justice is challenged. We want good precepts and sensible programs, but the logic of our ethics is broken by the mystery of God. When the grace of God breaks the web of oppression and makes justice, when the marginalized are restored to a place of standing within the community, then new possibilities for both

division and solidarity are created.

The workers were divided before the story began. A surplus labor market forced them into competition with one another, and the landowner took advantage of their position. Some of those gathered in the marketplace, perhaps the more able bodied, or those who had bribed their way, or those by right of birth, local history or the suppression of others, were entitled to be at the front of the line. They were hired for a full day's labor, and given a fair wage.

As a white Christian woman, I expected to be accepted at college if my grades were good enough, even in my day. It was not until I read the alumnae magazine two years ago that I realized we had a quota system for Jewish women in the 60's. I did know, and notice, how few black women were in my class, but I didn't question the absence of Hispanic or Chicana or native women.

Others in the story were accustomed to being marginal. They knew the oppressive system in which they lived. They knew that some were day laborers, and some were hired only by the hour. So they stayed around, waiting to see if they could make a few pennies at an hourly rate. And they were hired at the third and the sixth and the ninth hours, with no specific promise as to the wage, simply that they would be given whatever was right.

Then there were those eleventh hour people, who had been standing idle all day. Waiting and watching as others were hired, as others went off to earn money to put food on the table and pay the rent and buy clothing for their children. "No one

has hired us," they said. It is not that we are unwilling to work. We have been waiting, hoping, and yes, expecting to be hired, or else we would have gone home.

The treatment of those people challenges not simply our stinginess, but our ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Their treatment moves us into the rule of God, where the certainties of our ethical principles and moral systems are shattered. The realm of God makes clear the web of oppression, and requires a redress of imbalance, resistance to radical evil, the creating of commonality, of community. Solidarity, in the realm of God, means living genuinely as equals, not retaining a position of privilege at the head of the line.

Those eleventh hour people did not receive what they had earned. Rather, they received compensation for the injustice with which they and their ancestors had lived through all the heat of many days. They are the ones who received justice, while those hired first, and perhaps even at the third hour, were challenged to look again at their relative privilege, their social location, and the ways in which they oppressed others.

As I look at the Maine basketball team, I know they are receiving grace, as well as what they have earned. They are the recipients of compensation for oppression, for injustice. People in my generation, who worked so hard to accomplish justice for ourselves and for those who have come after us, do not receive the compensation, except as we stand in solidarity with those women in the new community. And while we stand with one another in the new community of God, sometimes called the church, we must acknowledge that our eyes ~~are~~ may at times be

evil.

Those who were first in line at the beginning of the story were now the last to receive payment for their work. They stood and watched while the others received their pay, and were at first amazed at what the landowner's generosity promised for them. Then they grumbled because the way they had developed expectations for their place in the world was swept away from beneath their feet.

"These last worked only one hour," they said, "and you have made them equal to us, who have borne the burden of the day." You have made them equal to us. You have changed the rules, swept ground out from under where we stand. You have taken our differences, our divisions, and washed them away. You have created a new community, in which everyone has a place of standing. You are redressing imbalance, breaking oppressive structures, creating justice. You have made them equal to us.

This parable, while it acknowledges divisions and creates hostilities, also establishes a new basis for community. It is community constructed on grace, in which the playing field is leveled, and the rough places are made plane. Where compensation is made for the inequities which had gone before. It is a community centered not in what we have earned, nor in the rights and privileges any of us have inherited. Rather, it is a community based in the unsettling justice of God.

How we hear the parable depends to a very great extent on where we enter it. If I enter it from the Passamaquoddy Indian

reservation in Princeton, Maine, I will experience that day's wage very differently than if I enter from Beacon Hill, or Stamford, Connecticut. If I have watched my son bounce from one foster home to another, because the state refuses to give him an appropriate therapeutic placement, I will receive grace as justice very differently than if my son has moved smoothly through high school to MIT and a job on 128.

This parable acknowledges both the differences and the divisions between people, and firmly declares that in the rule of God, injustice and oppression is rectified, that indeed there shall be no mourning nor crying nor pain any more in all of God's holy mountain.

So, how do we build community in a world of differences which are oppressive? In a world where those of us who work to be sure that no one must wait until the eleventh hour both rejoice in and resent the generosity we help to create?

By recognizing that it is not generosity, it is justice, that in the realm of God, grace makes us equal. And now we are returned full circle, back around to where we started. Because the parable is about the rule of God, about what the world is and will be like when justice and mercy and peace are the principles upon which we stand. When bread and roses are part of everyone's life, not simply those few who, by whatever means, managed to be first in line.

Blessed Be.

WOMEN AND THE WORD
Anna Howard Shaw Center

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Esther 4.

I have not known Esther very well and I am quite pleased to make her acquaintance for this event.

According to a certain perspective, she was one of those women who have it made -- and she had it made in the time-honored ways that women have made it over the centuries.

She was very beautiful, beautiful enough to catch the king's eye and apparently very good in bed, because she became the king's favorite -- and eventually the queen.

I should note in passing that she replaced a queen who had refused the king's command to display herself before his courtiers like some kind of object to be admired. That took some kind of courage.

So Esther found herself living very well in the king's palace, with servants of her own, one of the king's favorites -- and I suppose we can assume jewels and bangles and rich purple robes and banquets and musicians and courtiers and dancing girls.

The images of a dozen Old Testament movies rise up before my mind's eye. Whatever -- Esther was doing very well for herself for an orphaned Jewish girl in exile in Persia, except that she neglected to tell the king -- or anyone else that she was Jewish. This was her secret, suggested by her uncle Mordecai -- that she had been raised by him after her parents died -- that she was one of the people of Israel, now living in diaspora in Persia.

She was doing very well, indeed, until the day that Mordecai's enemy, Haman, persuaded the king to send out the orders to kill all the Jews in Persia on a single day. A holocaust, if you will, in 500 B.C. And very abruptly into the midst of Esther's comfortable, relatively secure world comes the necessity to choose -- to claim who she is, where she belongs and what she is going to do about it.

Now the commentaries tell me that this is a secular book, that God is not mentioned at all in it. I live in a secular world -- a secular church, too -- and what I know about that world is that God is in it, even though God is unnamed and God works what God will, using whatever messengers and actors are available. God isn't even too fussy about who those messengers and actors are so long as they are willing!

So in this story it is Mordecai, the one who has raised Esther to womanhood who is God's messenger, who doesn't give up easily. He urges Esther to beg the king for mercy for her people.

She hesitates -- for to go before the king without his invitation is to risk death -- not to mention everything else -- and he hasn't invited her for a month; and she's not sure she wants to risk her life or her comfortable situation. Mordecai reminds her that she, too, is a Jew. Her life is already at risk, because her special status does not necessarily mean special protection. If all the Jews are killed, she will be among them.

Then comes that wonderful question --

"Who knows but that you have come to this royal position for such a time as this?"

If I had any doubts before, I know that is God talking, for God does, indeed, call us to specific times and places for specific tasks. And Esther knows it, too, I suspect -- that it is God who calls her to do what she must do to save her people.

She knows the possible cost. She chooses to stand with her people regardless of the risk, because she belongs with them. She is ready to use the power she has in their behalf.

"Who knows but that you have come to this royal position for such a time as this?" Indeed, yes, God does put us where he wants us when he needs us! That moment of choice comes to all of us, the moment when we must decide who we are and where we stand and what we are going to do about it.

Now, I greatly admire -- and maybe there is some envy in it, too -- people who can decide and then act. I have a daughter like that. She makes up her mind and sets about doing it -- just like that, swiftly, directly. If she has second thoughts she never mentions them. And I marvel that I gave birth to and raised this wonderful creature, because that is not my way at all.

Like Esther, I must sit and weigh the options, look at the possibilities and outcomes before I can decide.

There are different styles of choosing and deciding in this world. Mordecai was sure of what Esther should do. Esther was not so sure. She had to think about it -- decide the risks, and in a real sense claim her power, before she could agree to act in behalf of her people.

For Esther the choice to act in behalf of her people was relatively clear. She had a ready answer to the question -- who are my people?

For some of us, the answer to that question is not so clear at all. Who are my people? With whom do I want to be identified? For whom am I willing to risk everything?

Once I was the wife of a 'rising young executive' and part of the corporate world and I looked at that world and its values and deeds of exploitation of workers and resources and knew these were not my people and chose to walk away from it.

For a time I was a lonely divorced woman and I looked into the world of the swinging singles with its bars and booze and computer match-making and one-night stands. I knew these were not my people, either.

Indeed, I still cannot be sure who are my people. Part of my spiritual journey has been to discover where I belong. As a white middle-class woman I have found many worlds which I cannot enter, experiences that I cannot share -- people who are not my people.

Perhaps it is like that for some of you, with your choosing beginning with the question -- who are my people?

Perhaps our people are those with whom God places us when God has a task for us to do.

Perhaps our people are those who need us at any given moment in history, as the Jews of Persis needed Esther.

And our choices, our decisions are limited to whether we will act in behalf of this particular people where God has brought us or not. Our choice, our decision really is to act in behalf of life or not.

That ultimately was Esther's decision, too, in this moment anyway. That is always the choice with which God confronts us.

'I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses,' God says.

'Now choose life that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to God's voice and hold fast to God.'

'Now choose life,' God demands and moves us to those times and places where we must. Thus did Mother Teresa leave her comfortable life in Italy and come to the people of the streets of Calcutta.

Thus do the mothers of the disappeared ones come to the city and village squares of Argentina.

Thus did four American women die in the jungles, their lives sacrificed for the peasants of El Salvador.

Thus do the women of England leave comfortable homes and lives and come to Greenham Common to stand against weapons that can destroy the planet.

Young Kim returns to Korea giving up citizenship to act, to do ministry for oppressed women.

'Now choose life,' God demands and moves us to those times and places where we must.

And amazingly, whether haltingly or firmly, sure of where we belong or not -- hesitating, uncertain -- those ancient words echo in our hearts and we decide, we act, we do what God would have us do -- most of the time.

We choose life --

for that is how God has made us --

and we are God's people!

"The Harvest of Discontent" (Mt. 20: 1-16)

The Parable Jesus told about the Workers in the Vineyard, at first appears to be a labor vs. management dispute. The standard labor practices under Roman law required the last employee hired for the day should be paid a full day's wages. However, this law was not in force in Palestine, in Jesus' day. When harvest time came around, extra hired hands were needed to get the harvest in, before bad weather could ruin them. The owner of the vineyard had a sense of urgency about having enough employees to get the harvest in, and the job completed. We are not told whether the owner had finished harvesting for the season, or if he needed to hire workers for many more days to come. We only know that the owner was ready to settle the account for the work that had been completed for the day. He was obviously present when the labourers were paid. The labourers were hired and received what they needed for themselves and their families. There was nothing wrong with their receiving a denarius for a day's work. One denarius was the equivalent of 20 cents, and in a Roman economy, nearly two thousand years ago, that was a just wage.

When you compare that wage with what the factory girls, and I mean young children, who began working at age eight or ten in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts, earned is appalling. They worked twelve to fourteen hours every day, six days a week, and only received three dollars all week. The young girls working in the sweat shops, at the height of the textile manufacturing, in the late eighteen hundreds, in New England, earned the equivalent of three and a half cents an

hour, or fifty cents a day for all of their efforts. That is only thirty cents more, a day, than the laborers in the vineyard earned during Jesus' time.

All the workers received the same amount, no matter the length of time they worked; but the ones who had been working very early in the day, through out the whole day, angrily complained to the owner that they were not being treated fairly. From their viewpoint it was unjust, to receive equal pay for unequal work. But, I believe there was more ~~a~~ stake here than the issue of the wages. It had to do with the resentment, and even jealousy towards those workers who were hired last by the vineyard owner. The ones who had been there longer had not been treated poorly. Their work had not put them at risk. It wasn't dangerous work. So why all the grumbling and complaining? The expectations were the same for all the workers, no matter the length of time they had been in the vineyard.

Let us assume that working in the vineyard is analogous to being in the ordained ministry. There have been some for whom the ordained ministry has always been open. For nearly nineteen hundred years, any male, mostly white, could with discipline and training, attain ministerial leadership in the church. There he enjoyed the privilege of being able to work in the vineyard. He set the rules, as to what work was to be done, and how one was to go about doing it. Eventually, the tasks were expanded and more labourers were needed to accomodate all the demands of the vineyard. Those who worked in the vineyard were committed, dedicated, loyal, and faithful. What's

more they enjoyed the satisfying and productive results of their labors. The effort each worker gave did not go unnoticed by the landowner. But it troubled the landowner, when he heard the laborers boasting about how specialized and unique they alone had become at harvesting the grapes. They developed an elitist attitude which had flawed their thinking. They saw themselves as superior to anyone else who followed them. It was the workers themselves who had created the working standards for those who followed, not the owner! And because they made the rules, anyone who came later and challenged the system would be unfairly criticized for her or his work. All who followed later and worked side by side with the others, were always being unfairly compared with those who had been there the longest. There always seemed to be a biting word of criticism and a judgemental tone from the old guard towards the newcomer. It was discouraging to the newcomer not to be accepted fully by those who had been long-time members. They felt challenged at every turn. Isn't that the way it is in our churches today? The long-time members always want new people to come into the church, and help share the load of responsibility. They want the new members to become involved in the life of the church. It is hoped they will teach Sunday School, work on a church committee, and volunteer to fix up the church.....as long as it is done in the same old way. Doing things differently, or changing the way things get done in the church is always threatening to the long-time church members, isn't it? God help the new person who suggests a better, or different way of doing a certain job. For undoubtedly the reply will be, "We've never

done it that way before."

I can identify with those workers who came later. As a woman pastor, who has only been in the ministry nine years, I have felt the criticism of other pastors. I have felt that the rules of what, and how to do parish ministry has already been determined by the previous generations of my predecessors. Their way became the work standard for those who would follow. A sixty hour work week became the model, and it was understood that to be successful minister, one was to put your church first, your family second, and yourself last. To be really effective was to work long hours, at trying to resolve conflicts both within the church and throughout the world. That kind of intense level of work creates a lot of stress. I know ministers, men and women who pay a high price for that kind of work demand. They are having trouble with their marriages, because there is no quality time for their spouse. It means that they are absent most of the time as a parent to their children. Any many are having serious health problems, such as high blood pressure, heart disease and cancer. Stress is connected with our immune system. Medical reports now tell us that the higher the level of stress, the lower our immune system becomes. If our body's immune system is lowered, we are at higher risk for illness and disease. I want you to understand that we all have stress in our lives. But, it is how you and I handle stress that is important. If you do not, or cannot lower the stress in your life you are putting yourself at risk, not only physically but mentally.

I know, I am one of those people who developed cancer, and after my surgery, I began to examine everything in my life that may have contributed to this life-threatening disease. I became involved in a cancer support group at the New England Deaconess Hospital. It was through the Behavioral Medicine section that brought doctors, nurses, therapists, social workers, psychologists, and chaplains together in this cancer support group. It was a wholistic approach of body, mind and soul. I learned that all three must work in concert to be totally healthy. When one was out of alignment, it affects the other two. It was a wonderful affirming experience and I learned how to be in control of my body and mind. I remember one of the things that the intake doctor asked me to examine, were the events in my life prior to developing cancer. I told her the year before that my husband had moved to a new church. I had remained in my church, and we were living in two separate parsonages. We commuted over sixty miles, on day a week, trying to get together, to pay the bills, do the laundry, and the shopping for two households. The other six days I threw myself into my work. Forgetting to eat three meals a day, and feeling overwhelmed by the rugged schedule we both kept, all in the name of the church! I felt exhausted, and run down most of the time. But I felt driven to keep everything under control in my ministry and my marriage.

When I explained to the doctor all that I had been doing the previous year, she just shook her head, and said: "Well you know success can kill you!"

I have often thought about that, and I decided that there can and should be other models of ministry. I do not believe

that God called us to be workaholics. God called us to be faithful, not successful. And for me that faithfulness is as much for myself, as it is for my ministry. I know that the United Church of Christ, and the Roman Catholic churches, are taking burn-out of their ministers seriously. They are also exploring other work models of ministry, other than the minimum of a sixty hour work week.

What is frustrating for me, is when I, or my other colleagues in the United Methodist ministry raise that issue, we are told that, that is what it takes to be part of the "covenant community". And if we don't conform to those demands, then we are not living up to our commitment as ministers. I feel their response is a kind of judgement, upon those of us who want to challenge that kind of unhealthy work pattern.

What I need, and we need, both as long-time laborers and new-comers in the vineyard is a word of grace from the landowner directly. The surprise came when the landowner in this Parable, paid all the workers the same exact wage! Yet it troubles us that God is so generous to all the labourers. The word of hope for me is that God's expectations do not correspond with the labourers expectations. Human expectations of works righteousness are in sharp contrast with God's generous reward; not on the basis of works, but upon heeding the call in the first place! And being willing to work in the vineyard! To me, this is an expression of God's goodness. God is free to set the rewards, whatever way God wants to.

One of the commentaries on this text, said "that this Parable was a warning to Jesus' Disciples. It was as if Jesus

said to them, "You have received the great privilege of coming into the Christian church and fellowship very early, but don't expect any favors or preferential treatment." All persons no matter when they heed the call to come, are equally precious to God."

It is a warning to me also, as a white, middle class and heterosexual, and part of the privilege class; to call into question those who are not permitted by the workers to come into the vineyard at all.

We are all well aware of those workers who are left out altogether, because they are gay, or because of their race. Will we continue to send those willing workers a harsh message, that their services are not needed here in the church when there is still so much harvesting to be done? Will the church ever learn from its past mistakes, that it is God who owns the vineyard and not the labourers?

Will we continue to be envious of those who follow us with new and better methods of modeling ministry, rather than our own, old standard methods? One Thing we can be sure of is God's continuing surprising generosity to all the workers!
.....Amen.

"For Such a Time as This"
Rev. Sandi Rehe

Scripture: Esther 4

How many of you know the story contained in the book of Esther? It is never assigned as one of the lectionary readings, so churches which follow the Common Lectionary will never have heard portions of Esther read during worship. It reads like a novel, or perhaps one might better call it a novella, as it isn't terribly long. According to scholars, it is a fictional account set in the reign of Xerxes I, King of Persia from 486 to 465 B.C.E.

Our assigned text for today is the fourth chapter of Esther but, in order to understand the significance of Esther's action in the assigned reading, we really need to know the whole story. So let me begin at the beginning.

In the third year of his reign, King Xerxes threw a party. It was quite an affair. He invited all the princes and nobles, all the officials and military leaders of all the provinces under his rule, all 127 of them. The celebration lasted six months while the king displayed the vast wealth and splendor of his kingdom. Then he threw another party, this time inviting all the people, well, really only the men, in the capital city of Susa. This celebration only lasted a week, but still the king went all out on lavish decorations and food and drink. And, at the same time, Queen Vashti, gave a party for all the women in another part of the palace.

On the last day of this second celebration, King Xerxes, who was feeling no pain, sent for Queen Vashti so he could show her off to all the men. And she refused to come to him. Well, the king was not accustomed to being refused anything, and he was furious. It was his custom to ask for expert opinion on questions of law and order, so he spoke with the highest princes of the kingdom, wise men who understood the times. "According to the law," he asked, "what should be done with Queen Vashti, since she has refused to obey my command?" One of them answered, "The queen has insulted not only the king, but all the officials and citizens of the empire. When the women hear of this, every woman will look with contempt upon her husband, and will refuse to obey him. We advise that you issue a royal decree and make it law in all the provinces, that Vashti never again enter your presence and that you replace her with a better woman. Then when your edict is proclaimed, all the women will respect their husbands. And so the decree was sent to every province, that every husband should be lord in his own home and should speak with final authority.

Later on, the king's anger cooled, but he kept thinking about what had happened, so his aides suggested that a search be made for beautiful young virgins who would be brought to the harem at the palace. After receiving beauty treatments, each would be brought to the king and the one who pleased him most would be made queen.

Now, there was in the capital city of Susa a Jew named Mordecai who had been brought from Jerusalem as a captive.

Mordecai had a cousin named Esther. She was an orphan and Mordecai had adopted her as his own daughter. Esther was very beautiful and so she was among those chosen to be taken to the palace. No one knew that Esther was a Jew because Mordecai had forbidden her to reveal her nationality. All the girls were given beauty treatments and then were taken to the king. One by one, they went in to him in the evening, and in the morning they returned to a second harem, that of the king's concubines. They would never see the king again unless he was impressed enough to ask for them by name. King Xerxes preferred Esther over all the others. She won his favor and affection and he crowned her queen in place of Vashti and gave a great banquet in her honor.

Meanwhile, Mordecai had been appointed to an administrative position. Later, King Xerxes promoted a man named Haman to the position of Prime Minister. Haman was descended from the Amalekites, people who traditionally were enemies of the Israelites. When the king ordered everyone to show respect for the new Prime Minister by kneeling and bowing to him, Mordecai didn't do it. The other officials asked why, and urged him to obey, but Mordecai responded that he could not bow down to Haman because he was a Jew. Haman was furious and decided to destroy Mordecai and all his people throughout the entire kingdom. Lots were cast to decide the day and month and then Haman went to the king and said, "There is a certain race of people scattered throughout your empire who refuse to be assimilated. They observe their own customs and do not obey the laws of the empire. It is not to your advantage to tolerate them." And he asked for a decree that all the Jews be destroyed. King Xerxes gave Haman his official ring and allowed him to dictate the decree as he wished. And so the decree went out to all the provinces that on a given day all Jews, young and old, women and children, were to be annihilated and their belongings confiscated.

Now listen to the reading of Chapter 4 of the book of Esther.

"When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of

the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told her to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions."

At an event entitled "Honoring Difference" this is a most appropriate text for it tells of a time when difference was not honored. It was not even tolerated. When a ruler conquered another kingdom, the usual procedure was to deport the inhabitants to distant areas of his kingdom, separating and scattering them. Then he would import foreigners from the other areas to settle in the conquered land. The goal was assimilation and it apparently worked most of the time. But the Jews were a stubborn people. Even though scattered throughout the empire they continued to observe their own customs. And at times they would insist that the law of the empire was in conflict with the law of God and could not be obeyed.

It is a most appropriate text at an event where we have discussed the radical evil which exists where people are oppressed for it tells of a time of oppression. In that time and place all the power was in the hands of one man, the king, although at times he allowed others to exercise it in his name. The Jews, as a group, had no power but neither did any other group of people. Jews were no worse off than anyone else - as long as they conformed. It was only when they drew attention to themselves that they got into trouble.

With women it was a different matter. At an event focusing on women this is also an appropriate text for it tells of a time when women were treated as possessions, where each man, although he was powerless elsewhere, was by law given authority over his wife. He was lord in his own house.

And in this time of oppression, a woman named Esther found herself in a position of influence. It was a time of crisis for her people. They were threatened with annihilation and her uncle, whom she loved, was asking her to risk her position, and perhaps her very life, to try to save them. Was the risk Esther faced real? You bet it was! Remember what happened to Vashti! As long as the king was pleased with Esther she would be queen, but if she crossed him, she could be replaced as quickly as Vashti. What a dilemma. Do you wonder that she hesitated? I suspect that every one of us has, at some time or other, been in a position where we wanted to speak out in defense of another person or group, where we knew it was the right thing to do, and yet we hesitated out of fear, not wanting to call attention to ourselves, afraid that the oppressors would turn on us too.

I remember a day about twenty years ago. We had just moved from Ohio to Virginia and, on one of the very first Sundays in our new church, I sat and cringed at the racially prejudiced statements I heard in the adult Sunday school class I was visiting. But I confess that I remained silent. I was afraid. I felt I had no influence with those people, and indeed I didn't. Had I spoken, they probably would have rejected my words and perhaps would have rejected me as well.

But I remember another day too. Several years later, when I was vice-president and program chair-person of the United Methodist Women, I presented an Easter program to many of those same people. I told them the story of Jesus' life, from his birth to his death and resurrection, illustrated with slides from the art of Africa, where every face was black. They got the message, although not all of them liked it. I was able to speak and my message was heard because I was then in a position of influence.

Esther had no real power, but her position gave her a degree of influence. I speak today as a woman in a position of influence and I speak to you as persons who are or will be in positions of influence. I speak during a time of crisis for numerous people around the world. We have heard named again and again during this conference the evils of our time. There is no need to name them again. But, who knows but that we have come to our position for such a time as this? We worship the God who called us out of bondage in Egypt. We bear the name of the one who came to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives. Must we not also speak out against bondage and demand release for captives.

I have never been an activist. I had never, in my younger days, been a part of a demonstration of any kind but last year I found myself on a bus headed for Washington D.C. to take a stand for women's rights. I had done my part in the 70s to educate women about the abortion issue. I had no desire to spend two nights on a bus and the day between marching. I felt too old for that, but I felt that I had to go. I did not feel called to go because I am for abortion; it is one of the evils I deplore. I see it as a justice issue. If abortion is made illegal, it is the poor women who will suffer. Rich women will buy the abortions they want as they always have. But poor women will

once again be maimed and will die as they seek the abortions they feel they must have. On that trip I wore a clerical collar. It is the only time I have worn one. I had to borrow it as I don't even own one. But, it was with the influence of a clergy woman that I marched in Washington. And it is from this position that I will continue to speak for my people on this controversial issue.

Esther used her position of influence to save her people and I am suggesting that we must be willing to take the same risk for our people. We have a different definition of kinship though. All who seek to do God's will are brothers and sisters to Christ and so to us. Jesus said that whatever we do for the least of his brothers and sisters, we do for him. Anyone who is oppressed, whether an individual or a group, anyone whose well-being depends on the whim of the one or ones in power, all these are our people.

I am not a lesbian but how can I remain silent on the issue of ordination for homosexual persons when a dear friend, a deacon in the United Methodist Church, must take a leave of absence as he struggles to make a decision as to whether or not he can remain faithful to the vows the church requires of him. His gifts and graces for ministry are greater than mine and he is as surely called by God to ministry as I am. But, to be in ministry and to be faithful to his vows, he must be alone, without a partner, and this he does not believe is God's will for him.

Yesterday during worship we lit candles and lifted prayers of solidarity. I am saying that we need to stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, whether they are women, or blacks, or Asians, or Native Americans, or even Jews, in light of recent anti-semitic acts. We need to speak out for the very young, or the very old, or those whose sexual preference differs from the majority, or those who are differently-abled.

I think that it was Martin Luther King Jr. who said that none of us can breathe freely until all our people are free. As long as we live in a world where power is concentrated in the hands of a few, where it is possible, legally or illegally, for the powerful to oppress the powerless, none of us can breathe freely. "In Germany they first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me...."

God still calls us out of bondage. God still says to the Pharaohs and the Xerxes of the world, "Let my people go!" We, like Moses or Esther, must give voice to that cry. Who knows but that we have come to our position for such a time as this? The good news is that we don't stand alone. No matter how lonely it feels, God is with us in the struggle for justice.

Let us pray; "God of grace and God of glory, pour out your power on us, your people. Save us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore. Grant us wisdom and grant us courage, we pray, for the facing of this hour and the living of these days." Amen.

Virginia (Ginny) Purvis-Smith
Women and the Word
Group I-B, Judges 11:29-40
March, 1990

Re-Membering Ourselves

This story makes me suspicious, not only suspicious; I'm outraged! The plot is unbelievable, as are the characters. Jephthah bargains with God for a victory already guaranteed. An innocent child is killed for no purpose and no one protests.

As a character, Jephthah is drawn on a flat surface, one-dimensional. When we meet him earlier in the chapter, he is introduced as a mighty warrior, but the son of a harlot. His father's legitimate sons kick him out of the country. He hooks up with a band of worthless fellows and they spend their time going on raids. But when the Ammonites threaten Israel, who do the Israelites go to for help? Jephthah, an outlaw. Not only do they solicit his help, they promise to give him the leadership of the country, if he defeats the Ammonites. He says, sure.

Is this Jephthah's call? We do not know, because we are not told about God's opinion. But as soon as Jephthah arrives, he is given leadership, even before the fighting begins. The condition that he win is apparently forgotten.

In the verse which begins today's lesson, we learn that God's Spirit is upon him, but Jephthah drives an additional bargain with God, sort of a double guarantee for success. He defeats the Ammonites, and this robber baron, whom we can't imagine had kept many promises in his life up to this point, self-righteously blames his daughter for undoing him because she came out the door first.

And the character of the daughter, who is nameless. She dances out the door, a spontaneously childlike greeting. After Jephthah rebukes her, she doesn't even ask what the promise was before she accedes to it. She is as generous with her trust as she is generous with her praise.

The stereotypes of the characters seem a bit overdrawn. Jephthah--the mighty warrior, the rogue, who has no intimate relationships, a braggart who foolishly bargains with God. And the daughter--generous, happy, docile, compliant, surrounded and consoled by her deep and abiding friendships. Unbelievable. What can we do with this story?

Gabriel Josipovici, a scholar who studies Biblical narrative, makes a proposal about this story in The Book of God, about the entire Book of Judges, actually. The last section of Judges centers around the Levite's concubine, her appalling rape (what rape is not appalling) and gory dismemberment. And the first death in the book also deals with the theme of cutting up the human body. In addition, Judges tells the story of the hero Ehud, the left-handed killer of grossly overweight King Eglon, while he sits on his chamber pot. Almost all the deaths in Judges are unnatural, violent, and not followed by burial.

So Josipovici reads the entire book of Judges as an enactment of disorder, fragmentation and dismemberment, even to the level of the language, the actual words that are used. It is replete with word-play and riddles (remember Samson, the lion and the bees). It

is filled with oddly named characters such as Ehud, who, although distinguished by his left-handedness, is a Benjaminite, which means in Hebrew "sons of the right hand." Furthermore, the words are separated from their meaning, as the action is separated from its meaning. Jephthah's vow is not a vow. It is unnecessary and uncalled for. It is ambiguous at best; at worst, sinister in its outcome.

I agree with Josipovici that Judges is satire, a self-conscious parody of Genesis, Exodus and Deuteronomy. We characterize the time during the oversight of the Judges as one in which everyone does what is right in her or his own eyes. There is no king, which means there is no cohesiveness, in the land. Life is topsy-turvy, out-of-joint. Judges is filled with untimely, gruesome deaths. But in those other books of Scripture, Abraham, Jacob and Moses die at ripe old ages, in the fullness of time, having accomplished their tasks.

Even Jephthah's daughter enacts a reversal of time-honored custom. Phyllis Tribble, in her book Texts of Terror, reminds us that "her appearance and activity are no surprise. Long ago, after Yahweh brought back the water of the sea upon Pharaoh, his horses and his horsemen, Miriam, the prophet, 'took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with music and dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

Sing unto Yahweh, glorious deity!
The horse and the rider, God has hurled into the sea'"
(Exodus 15:19-21).

I said Jephthah's daughter's enactment of this custom was a reversal. Unlike Miriam, she was alone and she had no song. If she did, her words are stifled by Jephthah's wail. This story cannot be received without question. It makes me turn away in horror--horror at God's silence, at Jephthah's selfishness to the extent of sacrificing his daughter, horror at the daughter's acquiescence. If this is how we are to relate to one another and how God relates to us, I refuse to listen.

This is an anti-story. Neither Jephthah, his daughter, nor her friends, seem able to break out of the lock-step captivity to senseless vows and violent death. They do not claim the freedom God offers us to escape from death-dealing vows and stereotypes.

This story from Scripture seems to offer us no way out. What, then, are we to do about our captivities to distorted relationships and our inability to take responsibility for our own lives? We are locked into no less deadly situations.

I know a story of a daughter who is being senselessly sacrificed by her father. I am in graduate school at the moment and I teach English composition to first year college students. Some semesters I require students to keep journals. I said, only some semesters, because I've learned the process can be timely and the emotional cost to me is quite high.

While reading the last journal of the last student on the last assignment of one term, I turned to the final entry and was startled by the abrupt change in her handwriting. Her style had been to write in bold ink, but on that last page the tightly

compressed words unraveled; they melted on the page. The heavy, black ink lines were now thin and shaky. They faded in and out. But the distressing part was the content. She said she sometimes cut herself. She didn't know why. She had been doing it since she was eight. She wondered if she was going insane. Once she told her brother and her best friend, but neither of them seemed bothered by it. At least, they never asked about it again.

The students were leaving soon for Christmas break and I might never see her again. I didn't know what to do, so I talked with someone in the university counseling office. Initially he was suspicious of me. Why did I want to know? What was I going to do with any information he gave me? Why was I interested? I couldn't believe it. Was this a conspiracy of silence? The child needed help!

Eventually he explained that at least once a term they dealt with this kind of, he called it, cutting behavior. No, she was not crazy. No, she was not suicidal. Yes, of course, I should respond to her cry for help and assure her she was not the only one. Many young women do this, and counselors understand that this is a symptom and she can be helped. Only later, from my supervising teacher, did I learn that this behavior usually occurs in the context of incest.

That young woman was trying to break out of a pattern which made her a victim of everyone else's problems. She deserved to be healed and freed right now. Her written words, weak and wobbly as they were, were a courageous claim on freedom, freedom to live in

relationships undistorted by selfish needs. I refused to believe that my only option would be to memorialize her, as Jephthah's daughter was.

I cannot read and be content with Jephthah, his daughter, her friends or the story of my student. They live in and reflect a society characterized more by its breakdown than by its cohesiveness. Reading the book of Judges as a satire forces me to read it in contrast to texts which seek or demonstrate cohesiveness, such as Exodus. That book builds its cohesiveness when the people cry out and God hears their groan. In that story, words and vows have not lost their meanings. God remembers the divine covenant. In the context in which I work and study, a graduate department of English, this activity is called "self-fashioning."

People struggle today to find their voice, to use their own words and their own language to fashion themselves, just as the student did in her journal. When we take initiative to author our own lives, just as the people of Exodus authored their lives when they cried out in pain, we find our voice.

I want to sketch for you several examples of this process. In the early years of this century, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) recorded her struggle to come to a sense of her self in the book HERmione. Hermione is the name of the main character, but her family call her, HER. Her--a pronoun in the objective case. Her--an object. The one who receives the action. No she. Not the one who initiates. Her dated a fellow and was eventually engaged. And Her

struggled within the relationship to form her own identity. The book documents Her's search for her name. The book is autobiographical. In it this creative, vital woman never resolves the struggle; she never finds her name. She never takes shape.

Another example is more contemporary--the French writer, Monique Wittig. Wittig, as did H.D., stakes her claim on language. One of her books, The Lesbian Body, is an especially appropriate example given the context of the physical dismemberment represented in Judges. In The Lesbian Body, Wittig writes violently about ripping apart the female body, piece by piece. The body which is torn apart is the body which has been used, abused and discarded through the centuries. Then she reassembles the pieces deliberately, tenderly and caringly to shape a new woman.

And I want to describe to you an event typical of my own self-fashioning, my increasing awareness of my ambivalence about my own embodiment as a white, middle-aged, middle-class woman who preaches. I became conscious of it in response to a description of a woman who speak out in public, written by another French author, Helen Cixous. She says, watch her. The woman who speaks throws herself forward and lets her trembling words fly for as long as she has breath.

I thought, no. That's not what Cixous would see if she saw me preach. She would see me, if she could see me at all under my robe and behind the pulpit (symbols of patriarchal schooling and clericalism), lean back on my heels. She would hear my voice drop into a lower register. These are settling gestures which relax me

and allow me to interact with the congregation, to see the pensive looks, the puzzled looks, the bored looks. If I let my words fly, my voice rises higher and higher in my throat, until it constricts, and no words come out at all. The sanctuary walls absorb the light and the people in the pews turn into wood.

Who am I as a woman who preaches? Who am I as a disciple of Jesus, the Christ? Yes, I am ambivalent. I am in the process of self-fashioning.

There is one part of the story of Jephthah's daughter which rings true to me, and that is the care the women of Israel take to re-member her. Given the fragmentation and dismemberment throughout The Book of Judges, their re-membering recalls her body and her life, just as H.D. tries to re-member her young adulthood and just as Wittig re-members the female body.

Our challenge is to re-member, to fashion ourselves. The theologian Susan Dunfee has written that the sin of some people, particularly overly dependent or oppressed people, is not the time-honored sin of pride, of self-centeredness. It is, rather, the sin of a lack of pride, a lack of a centered self, a lack of authority, of taking the responsibility to shape our own lives.

The story of Jephthah's daughter cautions us that when times and relationships are fragmented and out-of-joint, every man does what is right in his own eyes. Society is fragmented. But the daughter reminds us that when society is fragmented, those who are socialized to provide the cohesiveness, the relationships (usually the woman), can err in the other extreme. They sacrifice

themselves thinking it is for the sake of cohesion and moral order. But justice is not served when they are faithful to an oppressive system. Someone must cry out.

The story does not blame either Jephthah or the daughter, it simply sets out the situation, but it does satirically depict a society which reinforces both the selfish and the selfless behavior. I believe the story calls each of us to break out of this dance of death. We are called by God to cry out, to find our language, to fashion whole and vital selves. We are called by God to our Exodus. We are called by God to freedom.

"Silence is Powerful"
Esther 4
Women & the Word
March 23, 1990

According to the Book of Ecclesiastes there is a season for everything and a time for every matter under heaven--a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak. I find myself turning to this passage in those moments when life seems particularly hard to take and I am longing for a sense of acceptance and serenity. There is some comfort in these words. But yet, when I am finding that I need to make a choice of seasons, then these words are not as helpful to me. In particular I struggle with knowing when it is time to keep silence and when it is time to speak. How do you know when it is the right time? As pastors and preachers and people of faith, how are we able to discern God's call to be prophetic and to bring up those taboo subjects within worship or meetings or with families? In our relationships, when is it best to share more fully of ourselves?

There are many themes in the Book of Esther, but in particular the 4th Chapter raises the issues of silence--keeping silence and breaking silence, and power--giving up and claiming power.

Mordecai learns of the plot to exterminate the Jews and is anything but silent about it. He puts on sackcloth and ashes, goes out into the midst of the city, cries and wails loudly and bitterly. And so do the Jews in other provinces.

But Esther, Mordecai's niece and Queen of Persia, tries to do what she can to cover up the signs of Mordecai's distress. She sends clothes to him so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he will not accept them.

She does not know why he is acting this way, so she sends someone out to talk to him. Mordecai explains that the king, her husband, in his royal oblivion has approved a plan, devised by his hateful associate, Haman, to exterminate the Jews. Mordecai charges Esther to go to the king to get the order reversed. And Esther explains that if she were to do this, they should both assume that she would be killed unless the king made an exception to the rule. For a man or woman to interrupt the king, to make an uninvited appearance would earn the penalty of death.

Mordecai sends back the famous reply, "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther calls for a fast in preparation and support for her breaking silence and challenging the law, saying, "So if I perish, I perish."

Up until now Esther doesn't seem to have much power. In part, that may be because she is a woman with rules and roles strictly defined for her. Everyone knows of her predecessor, Vashti, who refused an order of the king to

entertain his men friends because she wanted to stay with the women who she was hosting at her own party, that she was thrown out of the palace, and that decrees were sent everywhere in case other women might have heard of her daring and think that they, too, might disobey their husbands. But also, Esther is closetted. She is a Jew, and no one inside the palace knows that. She has a secret, and like for so many of us, our secrets have the tendency to take on their own power, and when they become great enough we tend to live through them and for them. So Esther has been silent about herself. And yet, she hasn't exhibited a desire to be any different. She seems to accept her circumstance, whatever it is, without any question or desire for her life to be otherwise. Maybe this also makes her seem to have little power.

But the situation before her begs for a voice. Someone has to stop this atrocity. Someone needs to ask the king if he has the slightest idea of what he has allowed to happen. Mordecai seems to think that Esther's is the most appropriate voice. Yet, what if Esther keeps silence? By his own statement Mordecai believes that relief will come, whether it is by her efforts, or some other cause--so is the salvation of her people what is at stake? Does Esther need to do this, does she need to assume her power as much for herself as for her people? The risk of Esther's breaking silence as someone who is not a king, who is a woman, who is a Jew among people who would have her exterminated if she

were anything but the queen, is death, which might be the ultimate consequence. But, for Esther, the time is right and even death becomes an acceptable risk.

Power begins to rise within her--Power, as someone who is less than a king, to challenge the law, to dare to speak to the king on her own initiative and terms--Power, as a woman who is the symbol of subjugation for all other women of the realm, to re-define herself and to behave differently--Power to claim her true identity as a Jew as she realizes that she is one with those who are outside the official seat of power, because after all, she is an outsider, too. The desire rises within her to give up the old source of her power--silence, obedience, to claim a new source--the imperative to do the right thing, the opportunity of making a sacrifice for a good cause, saving her people, rather than sacrificing herself and bending herself to fit in with the old norms. Power rises within Esther to risk even death. She has been confronted with the ultimate consequence and decides that the tables will turn and that she will confront it. Esther breaks silence.

How peculiar a circumstance is all of this? Esther's story could become a great alternative to all of the prince and princess stories where the heroic young prince always finds a way to save the princess in the end, because of course, princesses never are able to help themselves. But still, is this just another story with a happy ending? Does the circumstance seem to be like not even a

once-in-a-lifetime situation that any real person could expect to face?

Not at all. It is very real. Think how easily it all comes about. The Jews are in exile, banished from their homeland. Aren't there millions of people who are in exile in the world today? The plot to kill the Jews evolves from one person's insecurity into an irrational hatred for an entire group of people. Isn't hatred a formidable force at work in the world today? Thinking about Esther, in particular, her story may seem extreme, but any situation that keeps a person silent, closetted, removed from her or himself and removed from all others like them is an extreme situation because it takes an extreme toll on a person who must keep the door shut and who must keep themselves a secret.

There are people in this room, in our families, in our congregations who are bound by silence. Victims of sexual abuse and incest who battle with undeserved personal shame within themselves and who risk the ridicule and scorn of others if they tell their stories. Gay men and lesbians who know that breaking silence can carry the price of exclusion from their families, their livelihoods, their church--who risk when opening one door that all other doors will slam in their faces. Victims and benefactors of all of the "isms", the systemic injustices of racism, classism, sexism, who risk disruption in their neighborhoods, corporations, and churches if those subjects that have been taboo, those

injustices that have been unnamed are no longer kept silent.

But, it is the same God of the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is the same God of the Christian Scriptures who calls us to loose the bonds of wickedness--to loose the bonds of forced silence that perpetuate injustice--to inspire freedom and an atmosphere that encourages secrets to be shared, not because it is the honorable thing to do and supposedly the only way to have integrity, but for the sole purpose of offering ourselves to one another in love. We are called to loose the bonds of wickedness. We are called to support voices who break the silences that foster and create injustice, to support those who would break silence and be just as victimized by coming out as by remaining closetted. Silence can be broken by individuals, at the risk of individuals and the threat of even death. And silence can be broken by the comfortable majority or those who are comfortably on the inside who in many cases don't have nearly as much to lose--mostly comfort.

Audre Lorde wrote a poem for her children, entitled, "For Each Of You." This is the first half of it:

Be who you are and will be
 learn to cherish
 that boisterous Black Angel that drives you
 up one day and down another
 protecting the place where your power rises
 running like hot blood
 from the same source
 as your pain.

When you are hungry
 learn to eat
 whatever sustains you
 until morning

but do not be misled by details
simply because you live them.

Do not let your head deny
your hands
and memory of what passes through them
nor your eyes
nor your heart
everything can be used
except what is wasteful
(you will need
to remember this when you are accused of destruction).
Even when they are dangerous
examine the heart of those machines
which you hate
before you discard them
but do not mourn the lack of their power
lest you be condemned
to relive them.

There are times when keeping silence might be a
generous sacrifice. There are times when breaking silence
might be a generous sacrifice. When is the right time to
break silence? Maybe no time is ever the right time. Maybe
only God knows. Silence is powerful. Secrets are powerful.
There is a time for silence, and there is a time to speak.
There is a time for secrets, and a time for all things to be
revealed. Remember that sometimes because of the choices we
make, God's Truth prevails. And let us also remember that
sometimes inspite of the choices we make, God's Truth
prevails.

Will you pray with me?

O God, you are our refuge and strength, our help in time of
trouble. You are the source of our power. Remind us that
we live not just for ourselves; we live for you and we live
for each other. As you are the one who knows us through and
through and receives even those secrets that we can share
with no other, help us to live by your grace that we might
be brave enough to speak the truth and brave enough to
listen to the truth even when the truth might change us. By
your Love, may the road to true liberation find its place in
our hearts and our world. Amen.

Sacrifice of the Innocents
A Sermon on Judges 11:29-40
for "Women and the Word" at BUSTh

3-23-90

Of all the "texts of terror" in the scriptures, to borrow Phyllis Tribble's phrase, the story of Jephthah's daughter is surely one of the most poignant. A young girl, racing out to meet her father who is home safe and victorious in battle, only to be sentenced to death for her father's own vow... As she went into the wilderness to bewail her virginity with her female friends, so we too bewail her early, unjust, and violent death.

Perhaps because it is such a horror story, Jephthah's daughter is not much mentioned in church circles, either in the lectionary or in casual conversation. The first time I heard an mention of her in a church at all was when I was celebrating a funeral service for a 92 year old member of my congregation. She was also a member of the Order of the Eastern Star, an women's organization similar to the Masons, and the women in the Eastern Star had a part in the funeral service. I was sitting back, half-listening to their liturgy as I gathered my thoughts for the sermon.

But my thoughts were interrupted as I heard one woman say, "Hail to Ada, Jephthah's daughter, who in the morning of her life, surrendered to the grave the brightest of earthly hopes that she might be faithful to her convictions of the right, and preserve her father's honor." And I almost jumped up out of my seat. Preserve her father's honor! He killed her! What were these women talking about preserving her father's honor?!

But that was not exactly an opportune time to challenge the ladies of the Eastern Star... So a couple of weeks later I spoke to one of the women about it. Never mind wondering where they got the name Ada for this unnamed daughter... I asked why they

had used such a horrible passage as a role model. Didn't they know that Jephthah's vow was not an honorable thing, but an act of cowardice and a sudden loss of faith in the word and spirit of Yahweh? Didn't they understand that this girl was killed because her father determined what he, a military man, thought God would require, when there was no reason for God to require any such sacrifice at all? Did they realize how they were whitewashing a horrible story in the name of honor?

As you can probably guess, I didn't get very far in my questioning. The ponderous bulk of decades of tradition and litany of the Order of the Eastern Star far outweighed any authority I had as a new pastor. I continued to be appalled, but I was appalled alone.

Still, the Eastern Star isn't the first to overlook the tragedy of this daughter's early and violent death. The later Biblical accounts honor the military and moral leadership of the judges, including Jephthah. The author of Hebrews uses Jephthah as a prime example of one "who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice..." Jephthah is listed as a principle member of the great cloud of witnesses, urging the struggling Christian on to victory over sin. If Jephthah's daughter is included in that cloud of witnesses also, the author of Hebrews does not mention her.

So, despite the horror of this story, the perpetrator of child sacrifice is lifted up as an example for the faithful Christian to follow. Yes, the passage in Judges tells us how the daughters of Israel went into the mountains to mourn the daughter of Jephthah for four days, every year -- but that is mentioned almost as an aberration, something that was done while the rest of the ordinary Israelites went about celebrating the victory and short time of peace that Jephthah's military prowess had accomplished. And as time

went by, that military might was all that was remembered and passed on. That Jephthah made a desperation vow out in the battlefield, when he suddenly wasn't sure that God was really there, and that Jephthah's one faithless act turned into the horror, the tragedy of human sacrifice -- all this has been largely forgotten, swept into a painful corner of events that no one likes to look at very often, covered by the language of valor and honor and lofty principles.

Evidently we've learned the lesson of Hebrews 11 well -- we've taken the example of Jephthah to heart. Even now as we near the twenty-first century, even as we speak of democracy triumphing around the world, even in these hopeful times we continue to falter at the same point that Jephthah did. We still require human sacrifice, in our systems of government and economics, and even our religion.

Listen to the arguments about the so-called "peace dividend", the money that theoretically will be received from the slowing down of the military industrial complex. Various people have suggested investing that money into domestic programs, especially those which have been cut over the past 10 years... But you don't often hear those same lawmakers explaining why we had to sacrifice those domestic programs in the first place, or why our megatonage had to be built at the expense of pre-natal care, and school lunch programs, and national health care. Like Jephthah on the battlefield, our country has cried out, "We'll sacrifice our poor folks, we'll pour all our money into weapons instead of food and education, we'll set up a system of poverty that creates a tremendous drug culture, if only you, God, will give the communists into our hand." And as before, God has stayed silent -- while innocents have been slaughtered in alleys, and hopes for the future have been dashed to pieces in unemployment lines.

So, too, our entire economic system of capitalism, with its so-called "invisible hand" that molds our needs and our talents into one efficient machine -- it, too, requires human sacrifice. Child labor in the Phillipines, cutting sugar canes for US consumption; sweat shops in Haiti and Jamaica where women earn two dollars each 13 hour day making trousers for Sears; grape workers dying of pesticide poisoning in California so that table grapes can be shipped cheaply year-round; examples abound of how our lifestyle in these United States requires the sacrifice of human life all over the world.

Even in our own country, a certain level of unemployment is considered absolutely necessary to help curb inflation. A certain number of families left without income, a certain number of women and men with no employment future, and the resulting problems of low self-esteem, domestic violence, and despair... This is the human sacrifice we require, because like Jephthah we do not have the faith that God will provide for all. Our economic system sacrifices the many on the bottom so that the few on top can be assured a good living, and those in the middle assured of at least a moderate living.

Even the personal aspects of our society requires sacrifice. The recent emergence of the idea of a "Mommy track" for career women who are mothers tells all too clearly how we expect people to sacrifice their relationships with their families, especially their children, if they are going to make it in the business world. If you would be successful, then you will have to sacrifice the people dearest to you. We continue to lack the faith to depend on God for success, perhaps because God's view of success may be something other than a 6-digit income. Instead, we try to secure our vision of "making it", and in the process we place the lives of our children in the balance.

Where do we look for relief from this culture of human sacrifice? To the Church? How often have you heard it said, from the pulpit or the television screen, that God required the sacrifice of Jesus, the innocent, the sinless lamb, as a price tag for our sins? This is the only parent-child sacrifice that has not been hushed up, but instead held up on a pedestal for all to see. For God so loved the world -- that this holy man named Jesus had to suffer a terrible, violent death on a cross before God could get the compassion to forgive our sins. This looks a lot like the God Jephthah prayed to -- one who requires blood for blood, one who would desire the death of a child for the father's honor. This looks a lot like the God our social system prays to -- one who rewards quick wit and proper ideology, one who understands, with regret and resignation, that certain "unfortunate ones" may have to suffer for the "good of the whole."

If this is the message that our church is giving to the culture around us, then it is no wonder that Jephthah's daughter is sacrificed, again and again, day after day. Phyllis Trible cries out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken her?"

And yet it is we who carry the image of God! We are the agents of holy love in our world! And so our lament becomes, not "God why have you forsaken her?" but "Why have we forsaken her, and forsaken God as well?" Going into the hills and mourning is part of what we need to do, but it is not enough. We must stop the illusion that the sacrifice of one human life is a basic requirement for the well-being of another.

The spirit of Yahweh is with us, as fully as it was with Jephthah. When will we recognize that spirit's power? When will we stop trying to shore up our weak faith with vows that are unnecessary?

When we look to God for our success, in our homes and our workplaces and our

international affairs -- and when we allow the word of God to define what true success is -- then we'll "make it". When we listen to the eternal heart of God to understand how we ought to treat each other, then we'll stop using each other as objects for our personal gain, or as insurance premiums against our personal loss. When we not only acknowledge the Spirit but make a home for her within our hearts and minds, then we will come to a place of victory over all battles.

Then the altars of our human sacrifices will be torn down, and the days of wandering the hills and weeping will be over. Then we can begin to rebuild our society, our homes, our world, using not a foundation of fear and insecurity, but a foundation of faith. Then we'll understand that without justice as a cornerstone, no peace or success can ever be achieved.

Jephthah's daughter calls to us still, across the ages -- may her witness not be in vain.

Homily, Boston University
School of Theology
Women and the Word Con.
March 23, 1990
Rev. Lena Hill-Lawrence

"Your Arms Are To Short To Box With God"

A few years ago, as I was making my monthly trip to New York City by way of Amtrak, I discovered that there are many sermons in the things that we see, and the things that we do. As on most trips, one finds that traveling alone is a good time for reflection and observation. We have an opportunity to think about those things that an ordinary busy day does not allow. The beauty of God's creation is revealed to us in such a way that we never dreamed possible as scenic views flash by as the train rushes on to it's destination. Billboards filled with advertisements for consumable merchandise that we know that our well planned budgets will not allow. But it does not hurt to dream of things desired, and dream we do...

In the mist of observing all of this, I saw an advertisement that caused me to turn my head and take another look, for the title was of an usual nature. As the train slowly creep into the station, It was yet another billboard with the same advertisement. As fate would have it, the person who was sitting next to me was reading the latest edition of the New York Times, and I apologetically interrupted his reading and asked him if he would share the entertainment section of his paper with me for a few moments. He agreed, and I hurriedly flipped through the sections, trying very hard to

recapture that title once more. After some moments of searching, I discovered that the title in question was the title of a Broadway production that had produced a record breaking sell out audience and had been given excellent reviews by critics.

"Your Arms Are to Short to Box With God," it read. What a powerful realization I thought, on the part of the playwright. Of course, I knew that it was useless to think of getting tickets to this production, but my restrictions made me more the curious. I thought, what could have been on the mind of the author, as I began to piece together some circumstances that might have intrigued one to capture his/her audience with such a title.

I began to wonder in my spirit if this title had been derived from the experiences of one who had ultimately tried to bargain and reason with God, only to find that their resources were too limited, their power too weak, their minds too finite, their energies too restricted. In essence, man is no match for God, for man cannot call God into account. Throughout biblical history, men have sought to bargain with God. Not only biblical history, but men and women of today have sought means and derived ways to call God into account or to make a pact with God. How often do we find people declaring in loud voices, "Lord, if you will just help me get over this bad luck period, I will praise your name forever, or "Lord, if you just let me get up from my sick bed, I will give the rest of my days in service to you. "Lord, if you help me to get out of debt, and let me get my finances in tact, let me save a little money, and I will pay my tithes and offerings as your word has instructed." All of these "Lord's" and "if's". Words of reckoning and bargaining. Why is it that mankind find it difficult to simply ask God to bless us for who he is without attaching some liability to the

blessing. It is our duty to love and serve God in spirit and truth. There is really no need for God to bang us in the head to get our attention.

Our Old Testament scripture today tells the story of a man who came to understand that his arms really were too short to box with God. The story begins with Jephthah, a mighty and skillful warrior who had been born into an illegitimate relationship. Jephthah did not have the proper family structure as his other brothers, and upon their reaching manhood, they undoubtedly became embarrassed about the situation and feared that Jephthah would inherit some of their father's wealth. Unhappy with the thought of this, Jephthah is invited out of the house and sent on his merry way. Greed can be a dangerous thing. With no real place to call home and nothing to do, Jephthah hooks up with a group of men who roam throughout the land and rob and destroy in order to survive. Thus he develops great fighting skills and becomes a great warrior.

As time passes on, war breaks out with Jephthah's people and the elders of Gilead realize that in order to be victorious they would need the skills of a great warrior.

Thus, Jephthah was sought because he had become a great fighter and warrior. It is worthy to note here that sometimes those persons who we least expect, those who are rejected and cast aside, are the ones that we have to call upon in times of trouble. It pays that we be careful how we treat one another. Jephthah certainly has some concerns about this matter and brings the elders face to face with the fact that they once threw him out and why now are they asking for his help. It's amazing how God chooses people, ordinary people to do the work that needs to be done. To protect his interest and to protect himself from being in the position of

despair once more, he makes an agreement with the elder of Gilead that he would help if they agree to make him leader of the Gileadites. Being in a desperate situation, with no bargaining power, for you can't bargain when you are desperate and in despair, they readily agree to install him as their leader. He knows that he is not chosen because of family connections, rank or position, or even on the basis of moral character, but here he is a great military leader, raised up by God to meet an emergency in the life of his people.

If you have ever been an outcast, a reject of society, a person without honor, then you know how it is to want so desperately to gain position and power. Therefore to be able to stand before his people in a position of power and leadership is a great honor for Jephthah. Some people will do anything for position and power, or to have their names in flashing lights; they will even try to bargain with God. I often wonder why it was that Jephthah sought to bargain with God? Would not God have blessed him without the price tag attached? It's funny how sometimes we attempt to travel down roads that are not necessary to get us to our destination. God had not asked Jephthah to present a burnt offering. Did not Jephthah trust God to deliver him?

We have to be careful of the pacts that we attempt to make with God. Our way is not God's way, our mind is not God's mind. We are not certain how God may respond to the things that we ask. As an assurance of God's blessings, Jephthah vows to God that whatever comes through the door to meet him will be offered as a sacrifice to God. Little did he know or little did he think that just by chance his only beloved daughter would come to greet him. It seems to me that it would have been a ritual that his kind of behavior would have been expected of a child who had not seen her father for

a while and one who had just returned from battle victorious. In Jephthah's desire to be popular, to gain favor in the sight of men, he risked losing the thing that he loved the most.

So there she is running to the door to meet her father, happy with timbrels and dance. But something happens. Immediately upon seeing his daughter, he remembers the bargain that he made with God. The words of the Lord is that he rents his clothes and cries out in despair for he realizes what he has done. Embarrassed by the position he now finds himself, as people often do, he shifts the blame on someone else. As the great warrior that he is, he now finds himself in a hopeless and helpless situation. Is he not man enough to be responsible for his actions. He cannot admit his error. He immediately blames his daughter for his calamity. "Why did you come to the door he ask"? What a question! How was she to know that her father had bargain with God?

As we survey history, and even in our present time, women are often to blame for the failure of men. When children misbehave, often the mother is to blame for poor training, when husbands are angry or concerned with other problems, often the women become the punching bag to rid them of their frustration. Much of today's violence are directed towards women. Somebody has to take the blame, why not a woman. One thing that all of us must learn and that is how to except our own failures. We can't blame our lack of preparation, our lack of compassison, our lack of responsibility on anyone but ourselves. We must pick up our crosses and wear them well. We cannot expect anyone to pave roads for us, we must pave them ourselves. So here Jephthah stands realizing what he has done; knowing that he cannot take back what he has said, the vow has been sealed. What a shame! There are some prices that are

truly to much to pay. Somethings cannot be bargained with.

So there she stands. Brave and humble before her father. She is willing to be the sacrifice that her father has offered. When we think about it, did she really have a chose in the matter? Women in Old Testament times did not have a voice. As women of today we must fight to make our voices heard in a society that desires silence. Thanks be to God that his daughter did have one chose; and that was how she wanted to spend her time before she must be given up as a sacrifice. She chose to spend it with her friends to weep and to mourn for the life that she would never have, the love that she would never know, the anger that she could never reveal, the despair that she could never express. So there she goes to weep for all the men who would one day realize that their arms are too short to bargain with God.

Judith Jenkins Kohatsu

"I've got Mine, You've Got Yours!"

I was brought up with the admonishment "work hard, and you'll get what you what." The corollary to that, I surmised, was "the harder I work, the more I get. Coming from that perspective, it is not pleasant to read the parable of the workers in the vineyard. "This is good news," I want to sulk. "I'm to work all day under the hot sun and I receive the same as one who only works for an hour. It's not fair!" Being in ministry, being one who professes to want to walk in obedience to God's will, does not make the situation any easier. I find myself with Peter and the other disciples (four verses earlier). "What will there be for us?" they ask Jesus. "We have left everything to become your followers?" Jesus replies to the effect that "when the One whom God sent is seated on the heavenly throne", they too will have their thrones; all will be repaid many times over and gain eternal life. Sounds good to me. Apparently, that time and my time have yet to come; I find myself working longer and harder and being compensated in a manner that is equal to (or even less than) others who work less. I still begrudge others that unexpected boon that is occasionally granted to them.

Jesus sets the context of the parable as "the realm of heaven is like this", i.e. if we were to make God's will our will in our living, life would be like this. The emphasis is not on the variable hourly wage (the fewer hours worked the higher the rate) but rather on the generosity of the employer. The employer pays each worker such that each has enough to provide for their daily needs, that was the definition of a "fair" wage. Yet I (we) grumble, "These late-comer's have done

only one hour's work, yet you have treated them the same as us - and we have done most of the work and done it through the heat of the day." Unspoken are the suspicions that the others are better loved and we are undervalued, taken advantage of. I own these feelings as my own. Out of my insecurities arise questions of love-ability; out of my place in the social scheme (as a well-educated, hard-working white person) arise questions of why others can't work as hard to get what they need. The employer's question (why be so envious because I am kind) strikes much harder if translated literally - Is your eye evil because I am good?

From the perspective of the employer, the owner of the vineyard, I understand that the concern most directly is for the completion of the harvest. The grapes are ready to be taken in; this work must be done in a timely fashion before the fruit spoils in the field. With successful harvest comes sustenance for the community which surrounds the field. Thus, the owner sets out early to employ workers for the fields. At the start of the workday, after negotiations are completed, laborers are hired at a mutually agreeable "usual" wage - the wage needed to sustain life. Later in the day, the owner's concern for the timeliness of the harvest (and the subsequent welfare of the community) sends him back to the marketplace to hire more laborers. Those whom he encounters (standing idly and looking for work) are hired for a fair wage - but without entering into a negotiation process. The employer comes back three more times, the last time just one hour before sunset, to hire more workers at the "fair" wage. At the last encounter the owner asks "why have you been standing idle all day?" The answer given is "because no one has hired us." There is no indication that the

late "hires" have been hanging back in order to get a good deal; in fact we could assume that they have been seeking work and have been rejected for employment. So far - this sounds like good business practice. As the workers are paid off at the end of the day, those who worked one hour are given the fair wage (that which is needed to sustain life). Likewise those hired at 3pm, noon, and 9am are paid off with the same fair wage. To those workers with whom he had negotiated the "usual" wage (and who had labored all day), the owner paid exactly what he had agreed to - the same fair wage (the usual wage - that which is necessary to sustain life). In response to their grumblings, the employer reminds them that the agreement they made had indeed been kept. The generosity of the employer was the employer's business and not subject to control by the full-time workers.

So what am I to learn from all of this - to take what I think is a fair wage and then double it (or triple or quadruple) just in case someone comes in later and works less hours for the "usual" wage? No, I don't think that is the intention (although unfortunately it has become one of our practices). I learn that it is God's intention to have Creation cared for (the fields and the workers). I learn that it is God's intention that each worker be rewarded so that they are able to live - i.e. to have what they need. I learn that I as an able, perhaps preferred, certainly sought-after, worker have a chance to negotiate, to state my needs (and wants) and then arrive at an agreeable, life-sustaining wage. I also learn that God requires and has plans for others whom I may consider less able, less employable, less worthy - and that God intends to reward them so that their life needs are met also. I find that while I may be concerned with the smaller picture of my adequate or equitable

compensation, God is concerned with the larger picture of the life and sustenance of all Creation as well as my individual needs.

As I consider what it means to follow God's will, to work to bring about the realm of God more fully, this parable indicates that I have some very practical actions to take. If I am to take God's perspective and care for all Creation, including those that our dominant society may deem less useful, less worthy, I need to see that each person's basic needs are met. These are the intangible needs of dignity and self-respect as well as the tangible needs of food, shelter, education, medical care, employment, and recreation. In order to meet some of these tangible needs I may need to forfeit my perceived "bonus" for extra hours worked. In a state and nation where we are continually tempted with tax cuts (and the resultant service cut-backs), I must refuse to grant others less than the living wage - the money, goods and services necessary to life. Not only does this mean I must pay taxes, and probably higher taxes, but it also means I must work for changes in our system of living which values the goodness of workers by the color of their skin or their ethnic group or gender. I must open myself and my workplace to those differently-abled who can accomplish the assigned tasks in ways that the "normal" one. None of this is easy; all is necessary if I wish to live as God wills - if I wish to live in the realm of God.

The offense of this passage is not in the hard work I must do, such as I outlined previously. The offense is in my missing the good news and being unable to celebrate when others too receive the gift of life. The graceful news in this passage is three-fold, and is in fact the good news, the better news, and

the best news. The good news is that (in God's scheme of things) we are each to be granted sufficient pay to meet our living needs. The promise is that we are to have life and have it abundantly (that's why Christ came). The resources of Creation are adequate to accomplish this if we use them wisely (that is the promise of Genesis). The better news is that we are all "employable"; we are all acceptable for work in God's realm. The best news is that God's grace, God's willingness to love us and equip us with the gifts and talents to do God's will exceeds not only our expectations but also our wildest imagination (could the one-hour workers ever dreamed of getting a full day's pay?). God's grace is unlimited; only our willness to accept is limited. Throughout our lives we will in all probability be the workers hired at first light, those hired later in the day, and those hired just an hour before sunset. It is good to know that we can partake of the good, the better, and the best news - if we are willing.

When will we live in the "kingdom of heaven", the realm of God? I don't know when that time will fully come. I suspect that we have a lot more of bending our wills to God's will before we will see much progress. When we can be unthreatened by the last being first, by having unusual consequences from usual acts, we will see more of the realm of God. When I celebrate that I've got what I need to live and that you've got what you need, then I will realize (again) that God's realm has entered my living. When I become part of the proclamation of the good, better, and best news instead of an obstacle, then the realm of God will be more apparent. -

Contrary to all expectations and teachings of zero-sum philosophies, "my eye does not have to be evil when God is good"

and generous. I do not have to be blinded to the wealth I have received from God by my envy of another's good fortune in God's love. The choice after all is mine. I can labor in God's vineyard, God's Creation, or I can refuse to come to the marketplace, to come to life. For me - I'll choose to work, I'll choose to take my usual wage and rejoice when you get your living wage also. I'll choose to be part of the proclaiming that when you've got yours, I 've got mine.

GRATITUDE AND ENVY

A Sermon on the Parable of The Laborers in the Vineyard
Matthew 20: 1-16

Preached for Women and the Word
March 22, 1990
by Kathleen J. Greider

Think about how you feel after the burden of the day and scorching heat... And then it happens right in front of your eyes... Eleven hours or one, it makes no difference. Everybody gets paid the same. And when you object, the questions come at you like this householder just graduated top of her class at Harvard Law School...

"Do you begrudge me my generosity?"
What's there to say besides "yes"?
But fairness is a virtue, too.

"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"
Right again, you sure can.
That's the law.
Not necessarily right.

"Didn't you agree with me for a denarius?"
You've really got me there.
Seems I might have been hasty.
And it's strange to be having regrets
about a generous wage.
I know I'm not going to win this argument.
But I would like to remind you,
since you mentioned our agreement:
our agreement was a denarius for a day's work,
not just for showing up.

Now, just when we are about to win a round with the householder, the biblical commentators jump in like senior partners...

"The subject addressed by this parable is not the issue of a just wage or the settling of labor disputes. This parable is not about economics, it is about theology. The subject of the parable is the incomparable grace of God. In this regard it resembles the parable of the prodigal son."

If I may, counselors, two rebuttals:

First: Yes, a generous father threw a very terrific party for an undeserving son and got grumbled at by the resentful elder brother. But don't you think that was because they were all related?! These people in the vineyard don't even know each other.

Second: It's my hunch that for the teller of this parable there isn't any neat separation between economics and theology. So many of the stories about Jesus either wrestle with the intricacies of stewardship or use economic metaphors to illustrate matters of faith: the woman with the costly ointment, the moneychangers in the temple, the widow sweeping her floor in search of a lost coin, the valuable widow's mite. So it's my guess that the economic frame for this story about the incomparable grace of God is not just a coincidence.

The economics of this story are quickly dismissed because they seem unfair or unjust. But the economics portrayed in the story seem unjust only if your first reaction was, as mine was, to identify with the laborers who worked the longest. And those long-suffering first-hires can pull on our heartstrings. So clearly the most tired, the most virtuous, the most deserving...there may be an uncanny resemblance between them and the way we feel ourselves. For as passionately as we believe that God's grace is extended equally to all, for as long as we have been taught that we do not earn our salvation through good works, still, in the quiet of our burdened, scorched hearts, we may still feel that the first hires got done wrong.

But if we put ourselves in other roles, then justice seems to blossom right out there under the hot sun.

If we put ourselves in the place of the steward, we become agents of a new compassionate order, where we distribute to the people a fair, liveable wage instead of having to explain to them how their employment is a threat to the ledger book's bottom line.

If we put ourselves in the place of the last-hired, we are the dignified recipients of a generosity that is soothing ointment not, for a change, on our aching muscles, but on our aching souls, which have yearned for the day, any day, when putting bread on the tables should not burn us and weigh us down.

And if we put ourselves (could we dare it?) in the place of the householder, then we have the delightful role of dispensing sacred generosity and grace, which is sheer miracle in the face of the way things are done in the world.

My feeling about how the economics of this parable matter is that by his illustration, Jesus challenges us not simply to dismiss the concrete possibilities of God's grace but to take on the identities of its most non-rational players and then look for ways to be stewards and householders, recipients and dispensers of miraculous grace, in the concrete encounters of our lives.

Here's a parallel illustration from my lifestory. My ears perk up at farm stories because my father and mother were tenant farmers. My father's father and his father's father before him tilled the lush, fertile lands of Lancaster County, PA, and so it was a matter of some pride to carry on the tradition. Difference was that my grandfather owned his land and, because of tension in the family, my father ended up going away from that farm and farming land that belonged to another man, a doctor in town. There were some elder brothers in my father's story, too, who stayed home on the farm that Granddad owned, but that's a story for another day. So my father made an agreement with the householder for a 50-50 percentage split in the land's profits, and we went to work.

Many years went by, and one of the things I shared with my father was that we loved that land as if it were our own. And as the years went by, the deal that in the fifties had seemed fair turned sour in the sixties and seventies. The owner of the land made one revision in the profit-sharing agreement: 60-40. After a time we could no longer make a living on the wages to which my father had agreed. There was an auction of all our farm equipment and supplies. The red Ford tractor I had driven myself and my father's tobacco wagons and the smelly manure spreader were all pulled out on the lawn and sold to the people from neighboring farms, and my father entered into a period of unemployment.

Now, all this happened years before the farm crisis became the Farm Crisis in the Midwest, where people watched not just their equipment being sold but the land beneath their feet as well. There were few generous householders in their stories, either. But in the middle of the crisis, the film "Country" captured the fever in the land and the crying need for the healing balm of a miracle to soothe the souls of the dignified people who farm. One of the climactic moments in that film was the auction. But at that auction, the people from the neighboring farms didn't buy. They became stewards and householders, agents and dispensers of momentary grace by refusing to participate in the buying and selling of the land and life of a people. That scene in the film didn't have much to do with economics either, not insofar as it had any impact at all on how the real world operates. But through that moment on film came to people like me and my family an acknowledgment of our yearning for a different economic order and an articulation of our experience that it

is not unreasonable to hope for little miracles which drive financial institutions, however briefly, off the backs of the people.

One of the interesting things to me about this parable is that the most nonrational aspects of it concern the economics of the story, not the theology. The theology of the story asks of us no faithful hoping for a miracle, no suspension of our disbelief for the sake of a metaphysical maladaptation. It takes as its language a common, though often disavowed, human emotion, and shows how it separates us from God's grace. The theology of the story asks us to consider the cost of our envy, the ways in which we cannot see the grace that is ours because we are forever gazing with wistfulness at the riches of others.

One of the insidious things about envy is that it pulls a shade over our eyes. When we are envious, we no longer see things as they are but rather distort the actual events by seeing them through the lens of our own spiritual hunger. The last-hires grumble about the difference between themselves and the first-hires and turn difference into disparity. They envy the last-hires their good fortune and construe it as an advantage. And while they are occupied with envying, their own shiny denarius lays ignored in the palm of their hands, mirroring back the pinks and blues of the evening sky and promising a good meal and satisfied rest in the cool of the setting sun, all of which is lost on the persons to whom the promise is given.

Ann and Barry Ulanov have dared to write a whole book about this emotion we usually keep hidden inside, and they suggest that "envy between persons is a displacement of our own relation to the good."¹ And sure enough, the parable tells us that money isn't the issue in envy, nor is good fortune. What turns out to be the issue is their own status in relationship to the other workers and the householder: "These last have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." While they grumble and fret, their own good fortune, their own relation to the good, lies all around them, but ignored and wasted.

The Ulanovs also suggest that envy can lead us to what needs repair in and among us. Envy can be so ferocious an emotion because its purpose is to ward off a feeling of emptiness inside, to resent the good outside ourselves so as to forestall identifying the good that is already in us, or, even more demanding for those of us who have experienced abuse or damaging neglect, having to build up a sense of

¹ Ann and Barry Ulanov, Cinderella and Her Sisters: The Envy and the Envy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 9.

inner goodness from the very ground of our souls. If the lesson we learn from this parable concerns only the incomparable grace of God, we may leave undisturbed all the ways we push God's grace away, because it can find in us no home, no place of our acknowledgment and assent.

But finally, the heart of this parable, its impetus and heroine, is the generous householder, a messenger of the incomparable grace of God. She does not easily accept the envious evasion of the first-hired, but even she, with her interrogation skills honed at Harvard, could not bring herself to ask the question that would have cut to the heart of the spiritual matter, the godly questions which I believe Jesus asks us through this parable: Will you refuse the goodness that is yours? Or will you allow your dignified but burdened and scorched soul to be soothed by its own relation to goodness -- which is that when God comes into the marketplace to hire workers for the vineyard, God will choose you and me again and again for the work God needs done in the world. At the end of the day -- you pastors and other ministers listen up, now -- God will deal fairly with us all, not according to the hours of our labor but according to our response to the call. And when we who are weary go home, weary from all that been done and all that was left undone, Jesus promises us a satisfied rest in the cool of the evening. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."