
Again, I Say, Rejoice!

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 20 September 2026

Exodus 16:2-15 • Matthew 20:1-16



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our readings today are all about God's generosity and abundance. Our God is a God of abundance. He gives blessings without number. It is as much as I can do to give thanks for all the blessings he gives me. I pray each day, as I sit down to my evening meal, "Thank you, Lord, for the food on my table, and the blessings of this day." Then I take just a moment to remember how God has blessed me that day. Things that went well for me. Things that didn't go so well, but maybe in hindsight, it's a good thing they didn't. And since we are to give thanks in all things, I even at least try to thank God for the not-so-good things, and how God helped me to get through them.

In our Old Testament reading, as they say on television, we join our Israelites already part way across the desert and complaining about God's treatment of them. They are in the wilderness, and they are alive and well; yet they wish they were dead:

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (Exodus 16:3)

They would have preferred to die with full stomachs. The Lord is not very happy with them at present, because of their grumbling. Yet God had brought them out of Egypt, where they were enslaved and being worked to death. He drowned the entire army of the Pharaoh in the sea. And yet they quickly forget these things and wish to be back in Egypt.

This is interesting. The theme, you might say, of the Israelites' struggle throughout history has been a longing for freedom. Yet here they are wishing to be back in captivity, when they know that their God is on their side, and is a powerful God. Fortunately, he is also a forgiving God. Must God forgive the Israelites seven times, or seventy-seven times, for their ingratitude? It appears so. To forgive is divine, and this reading is a lesson in forgiveness for us, a lesson in being God-like. In the face of their ingratitude, God forgives them and provides for them. He says, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites," and he sends them quails for dinner and manna for breakfast. Furthermore, they saw the glory of God in the clouds, as God speaks to Moses. God provides abundance. Every day there will be food for them, and it will always be fresh, for they are only to gather what they need for that day. God is present to the Israelites in the wilderness in a way that they should only give thanks for.

For what does God ask of us? Only that we believe in him and serve him, through serving his people. If we are sincere in our faith and service, God will provide for us. Yet the Israelites acted with ingratitude, over and over in their journey through the wilderness. God's patience was sorely tried on many occasions. Many Israelites, who had been particularly unfaithful, did not complete the journey. Yet they were given everything. Surely they are a big example of how not to be! This scripture makes me think that I need to examine myself and my attitudes: have I really any reason at any time to be upset with God? I am sometimes, when things don't go my way. Yet God continues to be loving. I might have been angry with him for taking Melissa at a relatively young age (although she did live beyond three score and ten years). Yet God's mercy was evident through all the time she was ill, and right up to her death. I cannot but be grateful for God's love and blessings.

The Gospel reading reminds us that God's ways are not our ways. Several groups of labourers were hired at different times throughout the day, and yet the landowner paid everyone the same wage, one denarius, the usual day's wage for a labourer. Those who had worked all day grumbled and complained when the ones who only worked an hour or two got paid the same. Yet the landowner had not gone back on his word. He paid them what he promised them, and asks them, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" (That

question may grate on those who subscribe to Marxist economics — I am not one of them!)

The parable is a valuable lesson both in God's sovereignty and generosity. We may see the wages as our eternal reward. It does not matter when you come to faith in God, as long as you do it in this lifetime. Those who have been Christians all their lives are not more valuable than those who came to faith last week. God values us all the same. And the promise to us all is the same: come to me and have everlasting life in my presence. This parable suggests that the reward will be the same for everyone. In any case, there will be no room for envy when we all meet up in heaven. The unimaginable joy we feel will leave no room for that.

One further observation: the parable reflects life as we know it on earth. Some people seem to have easy lives; others seem to have to work hard for anything they get. I'm talking, of course, about material rewards. We are physical people and we can't live entirely spiritual lives, here in this world. There are differences of wealth, opportunity, social level, etc. Just as some of the vineyard workers worked 12 hours in the hot sun, some worked six hours, and some only one, we won't all have the same lives in this life. We won't even have the same amount of faith. I may have a weak faith when compared to my brother or sister who has a strong faith. I know people who amaze me with what I perceive as the depth of their faith. Yet as long as we know Christ, and give our lives to him, we are all the same, and we will enjoy the same reward. I needn't be jealous of those people whose faith seems so much stronger than mine. Faith is a gift from God, a blessing from God, and how can I be unhappy or dissatisfied with what I am given, when I receive so much?

So again, as Paul reminds us:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

and

Again, I say, rejoice!

(Philippians 4:4)

Amen.