

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20
Year A

Gratitude

[RCL] Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Children's books seem to fall into categories: one appears to be about obedience or learning to follow the rules, a great number are about bravery and perseverance, others are about understanding the world around you, but a great many of the books for children today are about teaching our children that they are loved unconditionally. There seems to be a lot of these books, yearning to reassure us that we are loveable. One book, *Mama, Do You Love Me?*, follows an Alaskan mother and daughter through a conversation where the toddler tests the boundaries and limits of her mother's love, only to find that even if mama is angry, she loves her daughter still. It's a story about how fragile we are as humans and how each of us is intrinsically good and worthy of love. It's a great and honest book, and in some way tells the story of how much God loves us.

Today we find Jesus telling a parable that is also about how much we are loved. The parable of the five o'clock people tells of how fragile we are as humans and how boundless God's love truly is. Many of us have heard a sermon every year on this parable. Sometimes it focuses on the anger and resentment of the people who showed up earlier in the day, sometimes it looks at why the people showed up at five, and other times we hear about how grace is given freely to all simply because they showed up. All of these ring true.

There is something quite fragile about humans; our fragility shows up when we baptize babies and ask their families to protect them from evil and for the community gathered to look after them. Each of us is born with the love and hope of God implanted in our hearts; unfortunately, we are born into a fragile and broken world. At baptism, each of us had people promise to look after us as we grew into the person God imagined us to be in the midst of our communities.

This is the world of the parable: good and fragile people doing their best, wondering why some got more for doing less. What we and the workers forget is that God is not like us. God is better and more loving than we can imagine being. God looks at the workers and says, "I love you regardless of what time you showed up for work, I'm just glad you showed up." Like the mother in the book, God's love is not conditional on our behavior, God just wants us to show up and work. It is a reminder that we need to be grateful for help in the work God has given us to do, regardless of what time that help arrives. The work is often about being a sign of love to the world, and finding ways to love others even if they don't agree with us, look like us, or behave the way we want them to... or show up first thing in the morning for work.

One of the best ways we can be signs of love in the world is to say thank you. Gratitude is an expression of love. When someone does something kind for us, regardless of whether they had to or not, it is a reminder of the goodness in them meeting the goodness in us—and the natural response to kindness is gratitude. Gratitude is extraordinarily important because it is a way for us to remember the goodness in others and ourselves—but still, it is easy to forget to be grateful.

Today in the Episcopal Church, we are remembering and giving thanks for the birth of Julia Chester Emery. One could argue that she was one who showed up early to work and that she worked without complaint. In the early 1900s, Julia helped organize the women of the church to participate in a daily spiritual discipline of gratitude. She asked that everyone remember that when something good happens in his or her day, that this is a gift from God, and to make a thank offering in remembrance that all good things come from God.

With this simple task, she began inviting people to participate in a spiritual discipline of gratitude. She worked tirelessly to promote gratitude and to support mission in the Episcopal Church with the funds collected each year. She did all of this at a time when women were not allowed to work if married and had very little status in the working world. She overcame much adversity to do the good thing that God planted in her heart. She was well known for her tireless dedication to her goal of helping support innovative ministries in the Episcopal Church. She rarely took “no” for an answer. Julia Chester Emery exemplified grit, faith, and the willingness to live more fully into being the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

A spiritual discipline of gratitude doesn’t sound like much, but how often do we forget to say thank you? Thank you seems too simple, and yet it has the power to transform our lives. Have you ever tried genuinely thanking someone from whom you ordered food or coffee? Yes, it is that person’s job to make the coffee, but aren’t you glad that he or she said “yes” to doing the job that day? What about people you work with? Have you thanked them for all they do to support you? Have you thanked your family and friends? Most of us know the pain of someone dying suddenly with words of gratitude left unspoken between us. Saying thank you is simple, but it is transformative.

The simple thank offering collected in 1883 continues to this day in the form of the United Thank Offering. All of the funds collected are given away to support innovative mission and ministry in our church, as a sign of gratitude for the good that God has done in our lives and a sign of gratitude for the good being done through others.

Today we give thanks for Julia Chester Emery, for her vision, dedication, and belief that we should all be more grateful. We’re thankful for the workers, missionaries, and grant sites that the United Thank Offering has supported. We give thanks for those that showed up early to labor to make the world better, and for those who are still showing up. We give thanks for all of those

who promised to support us at our baptism, and we give thanks for all who do ministry on our behalf. Today we give thanks for the goodness planted in our hearts, and we ask that we might be brave and tireless in our task, just like Julia Chester Emery.

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