

Making All Things New
a sermon based on Matthew 20:1-16
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Katonah NY, 21 September 2014
The Rev. Robert C. Lamborn, Interim Pastor

Matthew 20:1-16 “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. ⁵When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. ⁶And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ ⁷They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ ⁸When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ ⁹When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹²saying, ‘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.’ ¹³But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’ ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

“The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus says, “is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.” Pretty straightforward so far: People who don’t have steady work still gather very early in the day over near the Village Market here in Katonah and at the train station in Mt. Kisco to see who might have work for them. But this particular landowner turns out to have more egalitarianism than business sense. He pays all his workers the same, no matter if they worked all day or started working an hour before quitting time. “Are you envious because I am generous?” he asks one of the people grumbling about how unfair this kind of payscale is. It’s a rhetorical question, but “Yeah, I sure am!” the worker probably thinks.

What might happen if this parable continued into a second day? The landowner goes out early in the morning . . . and can’t find any workers. Can’t find any midmorning or at noon or midafternoon either, but at 5:00 he’s got tons of people who want to work for him! You couldn’t get the grapes harvested like that, but Jesus is not describing effective employment practices, he’s giving an image of the kingdom of heaven. Suffice it to say that it’s not conventional economics.

Today we kick off of our 2015 stewardship campaign, where we invite you to deepen your Christian faith, and grow in your relationship with God. The theme of this year’s campaign is, “Making all things new,” from the Book of Revelation, where God says, “See, I am making all things new.” St. Luke’s can look forward to much that will be new as you progress in your search for a new rector and continue to welcome new members into fully sharing in the life of the parish.

Deep Christian stewardship is also an alternative kind of economics. The way our culture tells us to relate to money is to get as much as we can, then spend as much as we can on ourselves, while saving as much as we can because of the great deals we get, so that we can take

what we save . . . and spend it on ourselves! You and I are constantly told that we don't have enough to be happy, and are bombarded with messages to spend on impulse, but at church we're asking you to do the opposite. We invite you to reflect and pray about what your priorities are, then to ask how closely your calendar and your checkbook reflect those priorities.

If you're like me you're presented with lots of opportunities to spend money without thinking about it. Taking time to reflect will help make sure that more of your resources of time, talent, and treasure go toward the things you believe are most important. Instead of, "How much money can I spend indulging myself?" the question becomes, "How much good can I do with the resources God has blessed me with?" Pledging generously to support the ministry of St. Luke's is one very good thing you can do with your resources; so is taking care of your family; so is supporting other charities you believe in; even spending some on yourself. By asking you to reflect deeply, we're inviting you out of a culture that promotes *dissatisfaction* that we never have enough, into the *deep satisfaction* of knowing that your God-given resources are being used in the ways you believe are most important. An alternative economics, if I may say so.

At the time of Hurricane Sandy, Amy and I had a mini-storage unit near our apartment in Manhattan. Unfortunately it was a basement unit in the part of Chelsea that flooded. It was about a week before I could go in and see the damage, and it was worse than I'd imagined. I went in wearing a mask, rubber gloves, and an old pair of shoes I could throw away afterward. The basement had been completely submerged, and even though the water was pumped out, as people retrieved their belongings, water had spilled out of boxes and covered the floor, and it smelled terrible down there!

The storage company had said that you could leave anything you didn't want and they'd clear everything out later. Convenient, but people didn't leave all of their abandoned property in their own storage unit. A lot was strewn on the floor of the little passageways so that you had to walk on top of other people's wet trash to get to your unit. I wanted to be thorough in deciding what to try to salvage and what to abandon, but I also wanted to be quick to reduce my chance of catching some disease! If it could go through the washing machine I kept it (and it took several times through the washer, I might add). If it could be soaked in a bleach solution and allowed to dry, I kept it as well. Things that we didn't care much about were easy to leave. Some of our Christmas ornaments couldn't be salvaged, though, and that was hard.

Then there was my guitar. Since my guitar was in a storage unit, you can tell that I don't play with any regularity, and it wasn't a fancy or expensive guitar. But the guitar is important to me because it belonged to my father. He bought it more than 50 years ago and gave it to me about 30 years ago when he upgraded to a better one. After days of being submerged in filthy flood water, all of the parts of my guitar had come completely unglued from each other. The flat pieces of wood were warping and the curved pieces of wood were springing out of shape.

I came *this close* to leaving it in the storage unit, but something told me maybe, just maybe, Jim Skinger [a St. Luke's parishioner] would know somebody who could try to fix it. So I carried my guitar out as gently as I could, the wet varnish rubbing off onto my hands, and after it had dried a few days, I called Jim. Not only did he have a friend who repairs string

instruments, he thought it was worth a try. I made clear this was not an expensive guitar and that it wouldn't be worth a ton of money to restore, but Jim could tell where my heart was.

Every once in a while Jim would tell me his friend was making progress—but had a lot of other projects going. One day, after more than a year, he called and said it was ready. When Jim brought me the guitar, I was thrilled. I never imagined it could look so good again. “What do I owe him?” I asked, knowing it took an awful lot of work to accomplish. “Nothing,” Jim said, “It was a labor of love.” Talk about alternative economics! This man repairs string instruments for a living and put a big chunk of time into my project.

I wrote a brightly glowing thank-you email to the repairman, and offered at least to reimburse the cost of his supplies. Here's how he replied: “You are so very welcome. A great many people lost so much. I'm grateful that I was able to give something back to someone. I really had a great time putting it back together. Rather than reimbursement could you put in a good word for me and my family with the man upstairs?” Now I'm always happy to pray for people, whether or not they fix my guitar, but I was profoundly moved by this man's generosity as an act of stewardship.

God said, “See, I am making *all things new*.” A friend back in seminary liked to point out that God *didn't* say, “See, I am making *all new things*.” God isn't giving up and starting over, but is making all things new—making us new! The simplest thing I could've done after Hurricane Sandy would've been to abandon my guitar and buy a new one. But I wanted my guitar because of what it means to me. St. Luke's has a priceless legacy passed down from previous generations--a beautiful building, a tradition of friendly welcoming, curiosity to learn new things, and a desire to serve. Thankfully St. Luke's has not gone through anything as catastrophic as my guitar did, but our life as a church takes constant tending and care--constant cultivating to grow--as God lovingly makes us new.

Last year we were blessed with increases in membership, attendance, and number of pledges of more than 10 per cent each. This year we're again seeing healthy increases in membership and attendance. How things turn out with pledging will be up to you. With the help of your pledge, we'll be able to take care of the legacy that has been passed along to us and carry it forward to our children and grandchildren with as much care as our predecessors did for us. But remember, St. Luke's building and budget and programs and staff all have a purpose beyond themselves. [*Showing the guitar*] I think you'll agree my guitar looks fantastic, especially for having been flooded to pieces by Sandy, but the purpose of a guitar isn't to look pretty. Jim can do it far better justice than I can. [*He plays a verse of “Amazing Grace” on my guitar.*]

Isn't stewardship *beautiful*? A completely restored guitar plus Jim's ability to play it, cultivated over decades of practice! The purpose of a guitar is to make music, and the purpose of a church is to live Christian faith. God lovingly wants to make us new through the Christian life we live and promote at St. Luke's—a beautiful dance of faith and love and service. As we hear from others at St. Luke's about stewardship over the next few weeks, I invite you to reflect and pray about what is the greatest good you can do with the resources God has blessed you with, and to take a step in the coming year toward the deep satisfaction of knowing those resources are supporting what you believe is truly important.

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