



Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In the gospel reading, Jesus offers a story about workers being paid. Some work for a full day, some for half a day, and others for an hour. The landowner pays everyone the same thing, a denarius. A denarius was a Roman coin, and it was the traditional daily wage in Biblical times. It was the benchmark. In this case, everyone got paid for a day’s labor, even though they did not all work for a day.

And some people complained. Some of the workers, the morning folks, complained about them getting the same wage. *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.*

I did all that work, but they got the same wages. That is not fair. The landowner responds that they should take their wages and leave and that they have no claim over the owner's money or any claim against the extent of his generosity. And the reading ends with what might be a cryptic message: *So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*

How does that follow? How are the last the first, like the last ones who showed up in the vineyard, and how are the first last, like the ones who worked a full day? And who is Jesus talking about?

This story comes toward the end of the gospel, as Jesus prepares the disciples for his crucifixion. And there are occasional discussions about who among the disciples is the greatest. Who is most beloved by Jesus, perhaps. Who is the most favored by God.

That surface discussion is being had in the shadow of Jesus saying that he was about to suffer and die. The disciples never really seem to grasp that Jesus will die, so this is not a question about Jesus' replacement. No, they are more likely sorting out the hierarchy, the pecking order among the disciples. And Jesus offers this story about the last being first.

The disciples had been with Jesus since the early times of his ministry. They have travelled about learning and serving. And someone who joined up early might expect that they would get in good with the boss, they would get the perks and privileges of being an early adopter. Jesus speaks directly against that idea, suggesting that these beloved disciples would themselves suffer in their own lives as they tried to spread the good news of Jesus' life and ministry. Not the best deal, but he did say the first shall be last.

Our painting today is of one of the disciples, Saint Matthew. Traditionally, Matthew is also called an evangelist, the author of one of the four gospels, but that is not likely to be the case. Some books of the Bible are written in the name of someone but not by that person. For example, Moses likely did not write down the five books of the Torah. Why? Because Ancient Hebrew had yet to be invented during his lifetime. David probably did not write all the Psalms – maybe a couple. Paul did not generate all his letters, some being in his name not of his writing. And it seems highly unlikely that it was Matthew who put pen to paper.

He may instead have been the source for some of these materials as an eyewitness. There are sections of the Gospel of Matthew that are unique to it, such as the story of the three magi travelling to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus. These were probably from an oral tradition that was carried down over time. Matthew, as the evangelist, seems to discuss the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem as a historical event. Estimates are that Matthew was first written down in the year 75 to 85, years after the Temple fell. The oldest surviving copy of the Gospel of Matthew is from the second century, so there is no way of looking back to some original text.

Our painting this morning is entitled the *Calling of Saint Matthew* by Caravaggio. It depicts a short passage from chapter 9 of the gospel of Matthew when he was called forth by Jesus to serve. *As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax-collection station, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.*

Little detail, but a few important things to note. Matthew was a tax collector. These were something like contractors working for the Roman government. They had to collect taxes in certain areas. They collected a set amount that the Romans dictated, but they could also collect a premium which was their payment. Some people collected a lot more because they had the power to do so. This obviously did not endear the tax collectors to the people, who saw them as collaborators and profiteers.

In the next portion of that same chapter, the disciples are asked by the Pharisees why Jesus is seen eating with and being with such people: *And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when [Jesus] heard this, he said, "Those who are well*

have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Basically, Jesus did not come to help the people who did not need help. And the tax collectors and the other sinners needed help. The Pharisees were policing the boundaries of good behavior while Jesus was trying to help those who had already been abandoned.

This explains the worker parable, for even those who come late to following Jesus would be saved while the early disciples who will work hard on his behalf would get the same reward in the Kingdom of God. The last would be first because they might not have lived the most virtuous of lives, but they would in time be able to repent and be forgiven.

This is like the story of the Prodigal Son who goes out, spends his inheritance, and comes back financially and spiritually broken. The father embraces his wayward son, but his other faithful son is embittered by this. I did not run off and spend your money. I stayed here and tended my responsibilities. And yet you throw a party for the troublemaker and never offer anything for me.

Again, this is a question of having control over the generosity of others. We have no claim over God's mercy, so if God chooses to forgive and that makes us upset, then we will need to get used to being upset. We do not control the gates of heaven.

This is similar to the story from the Book of Jonah. The people of Ninevah repented their sins and God forgave them. Jonah is angry with God for this and goes off to sulk. For Jonah wanted to see the city of Ninevah destroyed. Why? Because Ninevah (and the Assyrians) had conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel. Remember that Jonah famously ran away from God. He ended up in the belly of a whale who carried him back to his mission. Jonah knew that if he was sent to Ninevah to warn them about God's wrath, they would repent and God would forgive. And Jonah did not want them to be forgiven.

Take a look at our painting. It is from the Baroque period, known for embellishment and ornamentation, for use of drama and surprise. The men to the left are gathered around a table, huddled in the darkness. On that table are coins, an inkstand, and paper. They are tallying up the taxes and probably figuring out what their fees will be.

Please note that these men are dressed in what might be called a wealthy style, and yes first century Judean men probably did not have plumed hats and European hosiery. The painter Caravaggio was trying to convey a message to his contemporaries and a bunch of men in nondescript robes probably would have been lost on his fellow Italians. We get the right impression even centuries later, so he did his job.

To the right of the painting are two men, one of course being Jesus in a sporty little hat. The other is probably Peter, who is generally depicted as an older man. Jesus points toward the men and one older fellow points toward himself. Who, me?

The light shines from the right-hand side arising from Jesus' direction and illuminating the faces of the men at the table. They are otherwise in darkness, but the intervention of Jesus brings forth the light. The sinners see the light and Jesus calls Matthew forth to serve within that light. We are meant to see this as a depiction of a spiritual awakening, as we might have heard sung in Handel's *Messiah*, the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Now, is it really that easy? Is it that easy to tell the difference between darkness and light? Not literally darkness and light – that is pretty easy – but the underlying moral meaning. Matthew is seen swallowed up in darkness, the darkness of his life. But we do not commonly see clouds of doom floating over the people. We do not see the sin they bear in their lives or the weight of it upon their souls.

And yet many people think they can. They think they have a natural radar that gives them moral insight into the hearts of others. I have my doubts. Notice that no one except Jesus knew that Judas was the disciple who would betray them. There must be more to it than color coding, more than conveniently placed spotlights of sunlight and shadows of darkness.

We sometimes grow confident in our ability to distinguish between good people and bad people. That sadly could be old-fashioned prejudice with people dressing a certain way, or worse, looking a certain way. In my personal experience, that is the worst predictor of a person's character. As if bad people cannot put on a tuxedo or, gasp, be of a race or ethnicity the very same as our own.

We also might be tempted then to say that bad people do bad things and good people do good things. That rule is arguably a better rule, but it has problems as well.

What do bad people do? They hurt others. But if our picture of harm is street crime or drug use or behaviors of another social group, then we might be missing a lot of badness in our own backyards. And if our picture of goodness is philanthropy or etiquette or what we learned to do in our social circles, we again might not be seeing what is good in other less familiar settings.

For example, there are many fine institutions of learning and the arts and even religion that were formed and funded by truly terrible people. Terrible people who tended to wear tuxedos, plumed hats and hosiery, or their contemporary equivalent.

Stanford University was founded by Leland Stanford, a man who sought to eradicate the indigenous people of California and who tried to stop the immigration of Chinese workers to the United States. Both arose from his concern about the presence of the "inferior" races in his state.

On the East coast, the Harvard Divinity School issued a report a few years ago about how several of its original funders in the early 19th century obtained their wealth through slavery. That was for example from sugar plantations in Haiti owned by the Perkins family – and yes the Perkins School for the Blind was founded by them. Or as with Israel Thayer, who was an actual slave trader, one who provided key financial support to build the Harvard Divinity School. And yes, I could mention a few of our founding fathers, but that will be coming up in a sermon shortly.

These people in many respects were soul washing, to coin a term, offering up their wealth to the public as a charitable effort to launder their tainted souls. They were wealthy, so we can give them a pass as long as they have their names inscribed on the right walls or buildings.

Our understanding of darkness versus light, or sinfulness versus goodness, is relative to our cultural upbringing. Matthew was considered a sinner by the Pharisees. You were not supposed to help the Romans, although the Temple itself cooperated with the Romans in most ways as a matter of survival. Surviving is a good goal in most respects, but surviving at the expense of someone else's survival is far less defensible.

In the story of the crucifixion, Jesus was executed in part because his behavior could have angered the Romans and the high priest was worried. Jesus was being called the Messiah, someone destined to overthrow the oppressors of the people of God. The Romans were not fools and likely would have understood this title of Messiah as a flashpoint for rebellion. We do not even need to speculate about this because within a few decades of Jesus' death, there *was* a rebellion that led to the destruction of the Temple.

Matthew was a tax collector and therefore helped the Romans. Even though the Bible is silent on the question, one would expect that Matthew stopped being a tax collector after joining up with Jesus. He was clearly forgiven by Jesus, assuming that is even the correct term for this man.

What would it take for someone to be forgiven now? For personal questions, you repent directly to someone injured. But what about broader sinning, more socially troublesome sinning like the Perkins family or Israel Thayer?

We do not have slavery these days, but we have lots of economic sinning in new forms. There is modern slavery, sometimes called wage slavery. For example, if you pay someone the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour there is not a place in the United States where you can make ends meet while working fulltime. Not a single place.

The average livable wage in the United States would be \$25, which factors in healthcare costs which is a whole different sermon. For reference, the Massachusetts minimum wage is \$15 per hour while a living wage here would be \$30 per hour.

If you pay someone less than minimum wage, it is against the law, but if you pay someone less than a living wage, is it a sin? We do not usually describe economics in terms of sinfulness, but how should we describe our behavior? Our intent?

That which is specified by law has never been the minimum for good behavior. So, saying that I am following the law is not an indication of righteousness. Because recall that slavery was legal. Child labor was legal. Even seven-day work weeks would have been legal except for the religious expectation that Sundays would be free from work. That might sound like an old-timey rule, but practically speaking it was the one way that people got a day off. And I would bet more than a few of you had to, or still have to, work on Sundays for your work.

In the United States, we have an extraordinary work culture, which I do not mean as a compliment. Because if you were to work three jobs at federal minimum wage, for 120 hours mind you, you would still not be making a living wage. Just work harder is the underlying message but you might just run out of hours.

I realize that I am making a leap of logic here between economic equity and moral behavior. And yet the gospel was about wages.

When you come across someone in your day, say working at a coffee shop or at the supermarket, know that this person in Massachusetts is unlikely to be earning enough money to live comfortably. They cannot be self-sufficient and many of them, if not most of them, are not living with their parents. So, when you take issue with putting a dollar in the tip jar, keep that in mind.

I worked two jobs after college and then I did not need to, but not everyone can go to college let alone grad school. Economic issues are moral issues because the ability of people to live depends upon them. We often use the successes of our own lives as the yardstick for the minimum effort required. I do not know the story of everyone's life formation, but please do not assume that your story from your childhood is the origin story everyone else was given.

Matthew was a tax collector, a job that was perfectly legal but morally questionable. The people of Chestnut Hill often, if not always, have stable living situations and even a degree of comfort well beyond the average American. That comfort is desirable and I am not asking anyone to forgo taking care of themselves. But I will ask this: to consider taking care of others as well. And not just a few bucks for the grandkids, but for those in real need.

We will over the course of the fall be engaging in various activities. Collecting food for the food pantry. Making sandwiches for the homeless. Asking for donations for the new ministries of this church and the longstanding outreach that we have engaged in over the years. And, by the way, there are quite a few moments in the Bible where Jesus says to sell off everything and give it all to the poor. So, honestly, I think I am throwing a few soft balls over the plate.

As in this painting of Matthew and Jesus, the light can serve as an invitation for someone to come out of the shadows. Sometimes those shadows take the form of sinfulness like we read about in the Bible. But if we listen to Jesus, if we truly listen to and follow the teachings of Jesus, that darkness just as often arises from selfishness. From a sense of righteousness about who deserves our help and how that economic attitude keeps us from helping.

And yet Jesus, over and over, talked about the lavishness of divine mercy, about the lengths of God's generosity. We do not need to gatekeep God's love, like the Pharisees. And we so should think about the need for our own compassion in the same open and unbounded way.

That might take many forms. But when the time arises to help someone in need, someone you know or when a situation that arises, I would ask you at this time of the harvest season, of blessings being counted and thanksgiving being offered, to be prepared to help.

To listen to the words of Jesus and to become the light that someone mired in darkness might truly need to see. And to escape our own darkness that we never even noticed.

Amen.