

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 5, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Matthew 20:1-16

Sermon: In the Slow Lane (Lent 2)

I am the envy of many of my United Church colleagues all across the country. It's not often I can say that, but in this season I know it is true. More than a few years ago, the City of Ottawa embarked on a program of traffic control, called "traffic calming" – you know the speed monitors, the barriers down the centre of the road. And on many streets, the city crews painted the word "slow" in big white letters. And being such a bilingual city, not only slow, but "lent". L-E-N-T.

Last year, a colleague asked our facebook group to send her photos that would be appropriate a Lenten bulletin cover. So I marched out the door and down the street and took a photo of Tapiola Crescent, right at the place where the street reads: "Slow... Lent".



Everyone thought I had photo-shopped it. No, I told them, it's actually the French word *lent*, that means to slow – but what a great reminder, right? – Lent is a time to slow down.

However, we do live in a culture where slowing down is hard to do. We value hard work, early risers, those who put their nose to the grindstone, as my father used to say. Even when painful joints and bad balance and other physical ailments make slowing down a necessity, rather than a choice – even then the mind races ahead with thoughts like "I should be doing this, I should be doing more... why does everything take so long... Why can't I do what I used to do?!"

Lent is a time to slow down.

But there are deadlines to meet! And we are just climbing out of the rut created by COVID! We need to get on with things, make some progress, see some results.

Meanwhile the road ahead still says "Slow down it's Lent."

Many years before I came to be in ministry at Rideau Park, the congregation embraced a policy of respecting “a meeting-less Lent.” What a great policy, this also makes me the envy of my colleagues. I admit that some meetings are held on an emergency basis, and some committees have work that piles up and needs to be addressed with a few phone calls and emails. But on the whole this is probably the most Christian, the most spiritual thing we do. Because during these forty days and forty nights, we make our spirituality a higher priority than our productivity.

In fact, we produce a whole lot more, it’s just it tends to be in the things you can’t see on a calendar or a spread sheet.

Lent is a time to slow down.

When we look at the gospel reading today, we find ourselves in the market place, as described by Jesus for this particular parable. It is early in the morning, probably 5 or 6 am. Day labourers who need to find a job for the day have congregated by the market gate, seeking to impress the employers who come looking for someone to hire to do their farm work. Along comes one such employer, a landowner who has vineyards and grapes that are ready to be harvested. “I need six good pickers” says the landowner, and walks away with six of the day labourers from the front of the crowd.

The remainder are disappointed, but not completely discouraged. They wait for the next opportunity and, three hours later, the same employer returns and scoops up another six workers.

You and I would likely give up by this time, anticipating sitting out in the sun right at the hottest part of the day. But day labourers were desperate people – if they didn’t work, it meant they didn’t eat, and their hungry children either.

So they stuck it out, through the hottest time of the day. Lo and behold didn’t the employer turn up a third time, taking away all but the very last of the workers.

Those last day labourers, to their credit, may have been the bottom of the barrel as workers, but they were apparently very strong in spirit. They stayed all through the afternoon, until there was only one hour of sunlight left to pick. And it was at that hour that the same employer turned up a final time, and called to the weakest and most unlikely workers that they should come along, there was still work to be done.

What a great ending, right? Everybody got work, everyone got paid and the landowner got the harvest in, right?

Except the real point of the story is the surprise at the end. Everyone was paid the same amount, the daily wage amount that was just enough to feed and house a family. Well, the early workers who had been picked first thing in the morning were infuriated. We did so much more work than they did, pointing at the ones who arrived just before sundown. We should get four times what you gave them!

To which the employer responded, Have I done you wrong? I paid you what I promised you, and I am free to pay the others what I choose. Why would you criticize me for giving them what they need to survive?

Like the first workers who were chosen, sometimes we can get so obsessed with what we think is right and what we think is fair, that we overlook the real question of the gospel: which is, at the end of the day, does everyone have what they need?

The great reformer Martin Luther once preached on this passage, and he warned his listeners not to jump to conclusions too quickly. In particular, he criticized other preachers who would construct a whole sermon assigning allegorical meaning to the characters and symbols in the story: the payment is eternal life, the landowner is God...

“Such talk is all right for pastime, he said, if there is nothing else to preach... We will let such fables pass and abide by the simple teaching and meaning of Christ who wishes to show ... that we should trust in nothing but the goodness and mercy of God.” And “that those who think themselves nothing should not despair but trust in the goodness of God.”

Martin Luther was adamant that faith was not about how long you had membership in the church, or how much you had donated, or how many committees you served, or how often you celebrated the sacrament. Faith, he insisted, was about the connection between you and God, it was not necessarily visible to someone outside that bond.

And so those 11th hour workers, the ones who spent all day waiting in the marketplace and only made it onto the payroll at the very last minute, they were just as valuable as the ones who had worked all day, maybe not in the marketplace but to God. God’s generosity is such that it breaks us out of our preconceived categories and overflows all the way to the fringes of society, spreading out to the marginalized and those who haven’t put in the kind of office time that the mainline workers were so proud of. God teaches us that work is a privilege, a blessing we are not meant to judge in others’ lives.

Maybe those last workers were valuable because they knew how to slow down and wait. They were valuable because they demonstrated their persistence by waiting all day for just the slightest glimmer. They didn’t rush off or head home or count the day as lost. They slowed right down and waited because they had hope.

Which, of course, looked like laziness to those who were working. Even though they all started that morning as equals – none of them better off than their neighbour – they still felt justified to criticize the ones whom the landowner hired last but paid first.

We place a lot of value on work in our culture. We define people by the kind of work they do, and reward them for holding on to that kind of employment – even though it may be through the neglect of their own health or family or social commitments.

And then we believe, that those who have the best education or training and those who work the hardest in the most difficult jobs should be paid the best.

But with the impact of the pandemic, where cashiers, cleaners and delivery people suddenly became among the most valued essential workers – our assumptions and values about work has changed. We talk about “quiet quitting” and a four-day work week. We see businesses shutting down early because they can’t find workers to fill their late shifts. Some employees have simply refused to return to their offices or to 9 to 5 work days, to look for work that fits their desired schedule.

In what felt like the longest season of Lent ever, people actually learned to slow down, and many found they liked it better that way.

Like the first workers in the gospel story, we find that the paradigm has completely shifted in our world and something unexpected is at play. The landowner in the gospel made sure that everyone had what they needed at the end of the day, not minding the extra cost for the assurance it gave them that their workers could go home and feed their families. What changes do we in the 21st century need to make in our understanding of work and ensuring that everyone has what they need?

We don’t know why those late workers were chosen last, whether they were sleepy or small, clumsy or late – and to the employer in the gospel it didn’t matter. The landowner’s resources were apparently there for sharing, not for hoarding or for exploitation.

So this parable is a metaphor, with a practical application. The metaphor is that God’s love is generous and unexpected with all of the day workers, whether they started early or late.

And the practical application is applying that gospel to our own understanding of economics. How might our understanding change if the mark of success is not the number of billion dollar corporations, but how many people are hungry? Not how many new housing starts, but how many people do not have shelter. Not how many tax breaks are at play but how many use the food bank.

Both the metaphor and the practical application are one and the same. If we embrace a God whose love is for all, then we should live with compassion for all. If we speak of God whose resources are meant for all, then we should share with the same generosity. And it might mean slowing down, checking our assumptions, and choosing to producing care instead of competition.

I will give Martin Luther the last word – 5 hundred years later, we can still take something from his teaching: *For just as we have no reason to be presumptuous, so we have also no cause to doubt; but the golden mean is confirmed and fortified by this Gospel; so that we regard not the penny, but the goodness of the householder, which is alike and the same to high and low, to the first and the last, to saints and sinners, and no one can boast nor comfort himself nor presume more than another; for God is God of all, and it matters not who they are, or what they are called.*

Thanks be to God.