

Our Praise Comes in Response to the Living God
Psalms 105:1—6; Matthew 20:1—16

Don't be alarmed, but I think I'm going to report Jesus of Nazareth to the HR Department. And if *Human Resources* won't take up the case, there's always the *Wharton School of Finance*, where Jesus might have learned something about how to structure a fair salary package. And while it's obvious this story in Matthew 20 is just a story—a story about a vineyard owner hiring a bunch of day-laborers from sunrise to sunset—come on! Let's get real! As a carpenter and as a construction worker himself, Jesus should have known: the person who cultivates and picks grapes for eight to ten hours deserves more than the person who shows up for a single hour. Even in the Roman Empire, especially in a world where wealth is disturbed from top to bottom, or from the first to the last, it stands to reason that some employees get more and others get less. And yet, as Jesus relates his story, it doesn't make any sense!

Anyway, since we're in church, I thought we might turn our attention to *PRAISE*, which is a word derived from the Latin, *PRETIUM*—meaning *value*, meaning *worth*, or meaning *price*. These days, when a house is *appraised*, its market value is measured and we pay property taxes according to that *ap-PRAISE-al*. And, likewise, back in the first century, if the worshippers of Roman gods and goddesses brought things of value to the various temples—things like wine and grain and meat and fresh fruit—they were hoping for a fair exchange between them and whatever divine character they happened to praise. So, here we go again. Once again, everyone's negotiating. Even with PRAISE. Everyone's conniving to *give* in order to *get*. And, everyone knows—it's only right that if you *give* more, you should *get* more.

Everyone knows that... except Jesus of Nazareth, who is among those Jews who were nurtured and nourished by the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible. And so, what he knows, as he's telling stories about people who sweat and toil under the sun, is this: ALL OF THE MOST FAITHFUL PRAISE COMES IN RESPONSE TO YAHWEH, the Holy One of Israel. There is no *quid pro quo* involved. In fact, ultimately speaking, the only negotiations that matter are the covenants that God initiates with those who've been called (to work) by God. Consider:

Verse two: ***"After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into the vineyard..."***

Verse four: ***"You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right."***

Verse 13: ***"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?"***

You see, over and over again, we're brought round to '*an agreement*'—and to a renewal of the *same agreement*; and for any of the Jewish listeners to Jesus' story, there are these echoes:

Genesis 9:8—9: ***"God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants and with every living creature...' AGREED."***

Genesis 17:1—2: ***"When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared and said, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you...' AGREED."***

And so, the story reverberates—agreement after agreement—which God initiates— and to which the people of God respond with praise—until we get to Psalm 105:

"O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples..."

Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones."

In other words, this is our most meaningful work. Praise is our most meaningful work. And we're doing it—we're offering it—*NOT* in order to get what we deserve, *BUT* in order to remember and to affirm that which we've already been given. The poet Wendell Berry, who recently died at 92 years of age, spent a large chunk of his life, taking care of the Kentucky farm he and his family worked for generations. And if you want a glimpse of what I'm saying about praise listen to these lines from his *Mad Farmer Manifesto*:

... Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
which you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they've rotted into mold.
Call that profit. Prophesy such returns.

Another poet I really appreciate is James Wright, who whether he knew it or not, wrote a lot about the work of praise when he was idle—*Lying on a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota*:

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses
Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

Now, I'm sharing this twentieth century poetry with you because, in the first century, when the followers of Jesus were living from denarius to denarius, from day to day, he told them his own sort of poem— *about praise*. It wasn't a business memo. It wasn't a strategic plan about how to get God to bless you with health, wealth and prosperity. It was a poetic parable that conveyed the following message: EVEN WHEN PRAISE SEEMS LIKE A WASTE OF TIME, EVEN WHEN IT WON'T YIELD A COMPETITIVE WAGE SO THAT WE CAN GET AHEAD OF THE NEXT GUY, ***WE HAVE AN AGREEMENT*** AND THAT AGREEMENT IS WORTH MORE THAN WE THINK.

Believe it or not, when I was a stupid teenager, going to church to please my mother, I had no idea what praise was. In fact, my well-meaning Sunday School teachers would stand up to read Romans 11:33—36, and I could care less. I mean, compared to the fortune cookie that came after I chowed down my egg roll, compared with the horoscope that I could read in the newspaper, both of which promised me my future fame and popularity, the way the Apostle Paul would break into a doxology meant next to nothing:

***“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?
Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?
For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever. Amen.”***

And, I guess what I thought, between yawns, went something like this: *if I could just show up and endure how tedious worship is, at least then God might give me some brownie points.*

Think about it: this is how *CHURCH* sometimes works! And maybe it's worked this way since Moses led the Hebrew people away from their slave-labor in Egypt. Remember the story? The people of Israel aren't yet *the people of Israel*. They're just bricklayers and monument-makers for Pharaoh. And when Yahweh sends Moses to confront the Emperor of the Nile—who just wants to be immortalized as the pompous leader that he is—Exodus 3:12 describes the alternative kind of work that God arranges: ***“And this shall be a sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”*** Okay—that's a deal—right? We agree, right? Well, maybe. But when Moses and Yahweh are communing atop Mount Sinai, hashing out the covenant details, known as *the Ten Commandments*, the people are getting restless and bored. They're not about to wait around for God to employ them. They want to worship on their own terms. And so, in Exodus 32, here's Aaron, who has served in the shadow of Moses and maybe feels a little inferior. ***“Come, make gods for us,”*** the people say to him. ***“As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”*** And what follows, of course, is a lot of ritualistic hoopla and performance, including the melting down of golden earrings and the molding of that jewelry into the image of a colossal cow. None of this, I need to emphasize, comes IN RESPONSE to the covenant that Yahweh and Moses are making on the mountain; and that's why Jesus comes to tell his parable in Matthew 20: ***“Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?”*** *You agreed, didn't you? You agreed that you didn't want to get caught up in the rat race. You agreed that you didn't want to be buried under the burden of baking bricks for a megalomaniac. You agreed to get your hands dirty for the Glory of God, didn't you?*

Now, I have a confession to make, which I've made countless times before (and God knows).

Every Sunday, on my way here, I've driven by various church parking lots which are full, and for some of them the church has apparently hired traffic cops to coordinate the flow and channel all the cars of people coming and going into worship. And I'll admit to a little jealousy. And I'll admit to feeling a little competitive—and to wondering: *Is it because they're working harder than I'm working... than we're working...? Is that why God is rewarding them with larger crowds or more customers?* And, yes, this is my confession to being Aaron.

In 1948 Arthur Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman*; and what's fascinating about that play is how it seems to indict the whole corporate and commercialized carnival into which the Christian Church often stumbles and falls. Willy Loman is the main character—and here he is sharing his thoughts about his life's work:

“Well, I spent six or seven years after high school trying to work myself up. Shipping clerk, salesman, business of one kind or another. And it's a measly manner of existence. To get on that subway on the hot mornings in summer. To devote your whole life to keeping stock, or making phone calls, or selling or buying. To suffer fifty weeks of the year for the sake of a two-week vacation, when all you really desire is to be outdoors, with your shirt off. And always to have to get ahead of the next fella. And still — that's how you build a future.”

But is it?

On second thought, this morning, I'm not going to report Jesus to H.R. I'm going to report *Human Resources* to Jesus. He owns my future. He owns your future. He owns Northwood Presbyterian Church. And he can put us to the work of praise however, whenever and in whatever way he wants. Do we have an agreement? God, shall we shake on it?