

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on September 20, 2020 (Proper 20A)*

Good morning! As you can see, I'm standing here on the front lawn of the church. It's one of Cooper's favorite places to hang out — that's our little two-year old dog. And while he occasionally likes to do *other* things on the lawn, he often just likes to plop himself down in the sunshine and watch the action unfold out on Main Street. Sometimes, when I'm not in a rush, I join him on the grass, and the two of us contemplate the world together.

One of the things I've paid particular attention to in recent weeks is the beautiful tree that stands at the bottom of the hill. You can see it behind me. Father Robert claims it's the best spot in all of Hingham to watch the Fourth of July Parade, sitting under the cool shade of its branches. And I've gained a new appreciation for this majestic tree as I've sat sprawled out on the lawn staring at it with Cooper.

Not that it happens very often, but whenever I catch myself staring at a tree, I find it hard not to think of Alfred Joyce Kilmer's famous poem. Now there are really only three reasons you'd know about Joyce Kilmer. You're either a poetry scholar; you've passed the rest stop named after him on the New Jersey Turnpike; or at some point you studied his poem simply titled "Trees" in English class. You know the first line: "I think that I shall never see, a poem lovely as a tree."

But Kilmer also had a deep faith and it's the third stanza I think about: "A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray." I find these words especially poignant when staring at a stately tree on the front lawn of a church.

There's a simplicity to this sentiment, but also a clarity. Sometimes we overcomplicate the life of faith. We over-interpret Scripture; we get riled up about theological and liturgical minutia; like the ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness, we grumble and complain about all sorts of things that distract us from God's love and draw us away from God's grace. And as we go down that rabbit hole of distraction, we so often literally miss the forest for the trees.

This morning's parable of the laborers in the vineyard is complex, with multiple layers of meaning. It's the kind of passage that demands hours of study and the meaning seems to evolve every time you hear it. The story unfolds before us as the owner of a vineyard hires laborers at various times throughout the day. The ones hired in the morning put in a full day's work, the ones hired late in the afternoon only work for an hour. Yet come quitting time, the owner pays everyone an identical wage. Not surprisingly, the ones who worked all day in the hot sun and received the same pay as the johnny-come-latelies, complain bitterly.

Sometimes we see profound grace in the landowners' actions. All of these workers, no matter when they started working, receive the same agreed upon wage. No one was cheated; it was all above board. And whether they worked all day or just a couple of hours, they were compensated for their work. That's just grace, right? It doesn't matter at what point you come to accept Jesus in your life, salvation is freely offered. As a parable intended to illustrate the abundant grace of the Kingdom of Heaven, this makes sense. And it's why so many interpreters view the landowner in this story as a stand-in for God.

And yet, another way to interpret this parable paints the landowner in a much less flattering light. He's the one in power, after all; the one who hires and fires. Because of his wealth and privilege, he's not worried about where his next meal will come from. His body isn't being used as mere fodder for the local economy. At the end of the day, the owner can just go back to his large, comfortable estate, put his feet up, light a cigar, and enjoy the fruits of *others'* labor.

In this view, his whim about hiring whomever he wants whenever he wants is less about equality and more about sowing division. When he starts handing out wages — in a very public way — he has effectively divided these day laborers. He has used their fear surrounding economic insecurity and lack of a steady income to pit them against one another. It's a page right out of the union busting playbook and, ironically enough, we hear this just one week after Labor Day. We also hear it in the midst of a pandemic, where many are unable to find work. And others must make the impossible choice between paying rent or buying food. And at a time when immigrants and day laborers and communities of color are particularly vulnerable to inequalities in social, economic, and healthcare systems.

These are two very different interpretations of the same parable and they simply can't be reconciled. Or can they? What they have in common is reversal and the flipping over of everything we think we know. Just when we think we've figured it all out, the parable reverses course. Things aren't always as they appear at first glance. Who's the hero in this story? Or is it a story without a hero? Things shift and evolve. Who do we identify with in this story? Or do we identify with no one? Things shift and evolve. The last will be first, and the first will be last. Things shift and evolve.

This tree will shift and evolve as well in the days and months ahead. Its leaves will turn bright colors — a burning bush of sorts will rise out of this very spot. And then the colors will fade and the leaves will drop. The branches will be laid bare. Snow will cover them. You know the rest of the story — Spring will slowly but inevitably arrive, and Cooper and I will find ourselves stretched out on the lawn once again.

Life is complex, faith can be hard, not much is easy these days. And sometimes we simply need to sit and contemplate a tree. To remain rooted in our faith, even as things shift, evolve, and swirl around us. I'm reminded of an old prayer that encourages us who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life to rest in God's eternal changelessness. And sometimes that means finding inspiration in "A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray."