

Good morning, my name is Paul Briggs and I had the pleasure of being your Sunday supply priest over this past summer. On my final Sunday in August, you apparently made a mistake and never asked me for the church keys. And so here I am. I would like to amplify the the words of the the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians: *“I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith...”*. Paul sums up the work of an interim (and remember, in a sense, we are *all* interims). I am here with you and for you...for your progress and joy in faith. So let's get down to it.

“No joy comes from comparisons.” Have you ever noticed that? Rather than be content with what you have or who you are or what you've accomplished, we regularly look to those around us to decide whether it is enough based on what others have or are or have accomplished.

I suspect this is part of being human. And so we enjoy the car we drive...until we see a neighbor with a newer one. We are content in our relationship but wonder if the couple just down the street is happier. We love our kids but wish they could be better-rounded, like our best friend's kids appear to be. We feel good about our grades until we hear about the kid who is acing all his or her classes. Or, from the reverse direction – we see where someone else has made a mistake and thank our lucky stars we're smarter than that. Or we look at the unhappiness of a friend and conclude, it's really his own fault and are glad we make better choices.

The list could go on, but you probably get the point. No joy comes from comparisons. Only envy and resentment and bitterness or a superficial pride because you've chosen to make yourself feel better by looking down on someone else. And not only do we not bring joy, but we unintentionally denigrate the present reality with which we have been blessed.

I'm not sure this is the core of Matthew's parable. In fact, I suspect that Matthew shares this parable to illustrate the tension brewing between Jesus and his opponents and to diagnose their failure to accept Jesus' wider sense of grace. But if we locate the force of this parable only in the past, then I think we miss the difficult but crucial truth it offers us today. Which is simply and painfully that more often than not we tend to identify – often unconsciously – with the laborers working all day who feel taken advantage of, rather than with those who have received unexpected and unmerited generosity.

There is an implicit choice posed by this parable that is available to us regularly: do we take stock of what we think we deserve or of all the things we've been blessed by that we don't deserve? Do we look for places in our lives characterized by lack and scarcity or do we name and give thanks for places of abundance? Do we reflect on what others have and what we don't, or do we delight in the wonder of all that we have been given to which we had no guarantee or right to expect? Do we, in short, choose comparisons or do we choose joy?

It should be easy: no joy comes from comparisons, yet we make comparisons all the time out of insecurity. So what do we do? Here are a few practical

- 1) Take the advice your parents gave you: Count your blessings. Start each morning in prayer by naming two things for which you are grateful. Start your day by anchoring yourself in generosity for what you have been actually given rather than comparing it to some possibility.

2) My son, Caleb, taught me this. Each year we spend two weeks at Lake Sunapee, NH. Caleb had invited three other boys from high school and he insisted that everyone deposit their electronic devices in a basket. The result was amazing; we actually had meaningful conversations around the dining table and we had a deeper appreciation of the sounds and sights of beauty all around. So take a sabbath from your electronic devices at least once a week; turn your devices off an hour before bedtime. Social media is driven by inviting you to always check in on how everyone else you know is doing. Connectivity turns quickly into comparisons, and we forget that the pictures and profiles are often somewhat artificial, as we all try to compose a “self” that will impress others. One day a week away from social media can help clear and refresh your mind and spirit and turning off the device at night helps ensure you don’t go to sleep with these comparisons on your mind.

3) Practice vulnerability. So much of our culture invites us only to show what is strong and successful and put together. Yet each of us has broken places; each of us has experienced loss and disappointment; each has moments of fear as well as hope. I think we live at a time – and perhaps it’s always been this way – that we are afraid of showing those parts that while they are broken or messy, are also real. (Sometimes I think our broken places are the most real, most human.) But if we can stop pretending and offer our true selves, we might find others willing to do the same. And it’s hard to set up denigrating comparisons when you’re being real with each other. I’m sure other suggestions will come to mind and I hope you will share them.

And, in case you’re wondering in what way all of this is good news; consider this:

1) God gives enough. Each of the workers received a day’s wage. Some labored all day...just as they had signed up to do. Others labored for just an hour. At the end of the day, they *all* received just what they needed: enough. (Think of the petition, “give us this day our *daily* bread.”) God gives enough, and enough is something over which to rejoice.

2) God does not give up but keeps looking to find and save all. The landowner in the parable keeps going out all day long in order to find more and more people to work in the vineyard. He will not stop. Just so, God will not give up on seeking out the lost, the vulnerable, all who are in need, in short—all of us.

The Rev. Paul Briggs
17th Sunday After Pentecost
September 24, 2023
St. Thomas’ Church, Camden