

Resenting Equality

A sermon on Matthew 20:1-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 24 September 2017

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Message

When Jesus exposes our aversion to having others recognised as our equals, he calls us to repent and celebrate God's generosity to all. The marriage equality debate exposes another frontier of this challenge.

Sermon

Most of us are sick to death of the marriage equality debate. We just want it to be sorted and over. It shouldn't have happened. It's expensive. It's divisive. It's socially corrosive. And it is only taking place because trying to take it directly to parliament would have split the ruling party, and they'd rather divide the entire country than sort out their own house.

You're probably sick of hearing me talking about it in sermons too, and to be honest, I'm sick of mentioning it. There are more important things going on in the world than an unnecessary postal survey. \$122 million would have made a big difference to the rescue and aid efforts in Mexico and the Caribbean this week, and as someone who has a number of friends in the midst of those disasters, I'd certainly rather our country was focussed on lending a helping hand over there.

But this postal survey is not about to go away. It still has about six weeks to run. We won't be able to avoid talking about it. I can't remember the last time an issue was so dominant in the consciousness and conversations everywhere you went, and that was at the same time so closely bound up with the churches and with what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If we ignore for a moment the neo-nazis and [Cronulla Riot celebrators](#), most of the voices in the "no" campaign are associated with Christian churches, and we are being told that marriage equality is an offence to God and a threat to religious freedom. So when everyone is talking about the issue, and everyone is talking about the role and the attitude of Christians in the campaign, we can't ignore it. And here in the pulpit, I can't ignore it. There are things being said about us, and allegedly on our behalf, that seem to clash horribly with what Jesus has taught us and with who Jesus is. That demands reply.

Nevertheless, it will probably come as a surprise to you if I suggest that tonight's gospel reading, the parable of hiring the workers, speaks quite directly to one of the key issues in this marriage equality debate. I'm figuring it will come as a surprise to you, because it came as quite a surprise to me when it suddenly dawned on me this week.

I am not for a minute suggesting that Jesus was intending to address the issue of marriage equality when he told this parable. He wasn't. The Roman government didn't bother with postal ballots. They just made decisions, imposed them, and killed any trouble-makers. Just occasionally that doesn't look like such a bad approach!

So Jesus wasn't talking about postal ballots or marriage equality. But Jesus did know plenty about how divisive things could get when social conventions were challenged and people were asked to consider changing their attitudes about what was right and wrong. And he did know plenty about what happened when people felt that their position was under threat from others who were asking to be treated as equals. And this parable was spoken directly into those issues.

The social context into which this parable was probably addressed when Matthew recorded it was a church grappling with an influx of newcomers, and probably with the issue of the longer term members of the church being predominantly Jewish, and the newcomers being predominantly gentile. Even without the Jew-Gentile divide, you can probably picture what was happening. You may have even been in a church where the same thing has happened. I've occasionally seen glimpses of it here over the years. There is an influx of new people, and those new people start getting involved and taking on responsibilities and being seen as emerging leaders and the like, and suddenly you have some of the longer established folks saying "Hang on a minute. Who are these johnny-come-latelys, and who do they think they are carrying on as though they own the place just as much as us?"

You can ramp it up a bit more if the newcomers are new converts. "Who do they think they are? This time last year they weren't even Christians and now they think they can lead the worship service and join the church council."

And in Matthew's church, you can probably add, "Who do they think they are? This time last year they were still making sacrifices to pagan gods, and now they think they have an equal voice in the church with us who have been immersed in biblical teaching and biblical ethics since birth."

So against the background of this grumbling, Matthew reminds his church of the story that Jesus told about a landowner who kept going out all day and hiring more workers to work in his vineyard, and then at the end of the day, he paid them all the same full day's wage, whether they had worked 12 hours, eight hours, three hours, or even just one hour. Whatever the social background, it is one of the most confronting parables Jesus ever told. It offends our sense of justice, of fairness. Our society and economy work on a system of fair exchange, and so those who have given twice as much have every right to expect to receive twice as much in return. It's perfectly normal.

Now, one of the usual things that preachers, including me, tend to say about this parable is that the reality it reflects is a God who gives everything in abundance to everyone. We tend to say that the objection of the workers reflects a fear of scarcity. They think that they are missing out, that they could have been given more if it hadn't been unfairly given to undeserving others. But if we recognise that God is already giving us everything, and that God's generosity to others does not come at the expense of God's generosity to us, the complaints dissolve. God is already giving us everything and there is nothing more that we are missing out on. I still think that that is true. I've preached it before and I'll preach it again, but I don't think it is the whole story. There are some other things going on here, and this is where I think it has something to say to us about the marriage equality debate.

You see, the complaint voiced by the all-day workers in the parable is not simply that they weren't paid more. As the landowner points out, they were paid the wage they signed on for. But it is not just about the money. There is something more pointed and complicated in their complaint. They say, "You have made them equal to us." Hear that? It's not just, "You have paid them the same as us," it's "You have made them equal to us."

There's really only one argument being pushed by the "no" campaign for which I have any sympathy. Maybe two. No, probably just one. I also have some understanding for those who

have a very fixed view of biblical authority and who thus believe that we must vote against marriage equality on the basis of biblical passages that outlaw homosexuality. I have some understanding, because I used to be entangled in that worldview myself, but as a committed Baptist who therefore believes that nobody's religious beliefs should be legislatively imposed on anyone else, I don't have much sympathy for the argument that the marriage practices of the rest of society should be limited to those approved by a particular religion.

The argument for which I do have some sympathy is the one which I think ends up being challenged by tonight's gospel, and that is the argument that same-sex partnerships should be given a different name because they are a different thing. Unfortunately in the current climate, it is difficult to even express sympathy for this view, because the debate has become so polarised that it feels like there are only two possible positions and no subtle nuances are allowed. But I'll take the risk and say that I have some sympathy. I think you can, without disrespecting anyone, make a philosophical case that a union of opposites and a union of sameness are actually different things. Both equally legitimate but still essentially different, and therefore our language should recognise that difference.

Personally, although sympathetic, I had already abandoned that argument before I noticed what tonight's gospel might be saying about it. I had abandoned it because it seemed to me to be one of those good theories that get a bad name if you try to put them into practice. I have only once ever heard someone argue for that position without sounding like a security guard at an exclusive club trying to keep the riff-raff out.

This week, what had previously been something a gut reaction on my part based only on that frequent experience of real life was given a boost when I realised what was going on in Jesus's parable of the workers. The workers grumbled against the boss saying, "You have made them equal to us."

They are not actually objecting to not getting enough for themselves. They are objecting to those they have regarded as less worthy than themselves being accepted as their equals. And isn't that precisely what we are hearing much of the time in the "no" campaign. The defenders of traditional, heterosexual-only, marriage, are saying "This marriage club is an exclusive club for the likes of us. *They* are not allowed in. The law must not be changed because that would make *them* equal to us."

The problem with the argument that heterosexual marriage and same-sex marriage should have different names to reflect an essential difference is that we humans have, over a long period of time, proved ourselves incapable of officially recognising differences without instinctively arranging them in a hierarchy and snobbishly defending our position on the higher rungs. And the argument is pretty useless, in fact toxic, if we have proved ourselves incapable of putting it into practice any other way. If there was any doubt about that inability, this campaign has banished all doubt. We just can't do it.

Jesus is turning the spotlight on us here and exposing what really makes us tick. No, he wasn't talking about marriage equality at the time, but I have little doubt that Jesus would gladly tell this same story again in the face of this debate now. He is exposing how instinctively and often unconsciously we imagine ourselves to be superior to others and so more deserving of favourable legal definitions and labels and recognitions. He is exposing how deeply we resent the implication that others might actually be our equals and be deserving of being

acknowledged as such. “How dare you make *them* equal to us?!” “How dare you make *their* relationships equal to ours?!” Jesus is exposing our desire to be the chosen ones, the special ones, to be unchallenged as the good and right and approved ones. And he is unquestioningly calling us to repent.

The gospel, the good news of Jesus the Christ, celebrates diversity. Jesus breaks down barriers and welcomes in those who have previously been excluded, and the community he creates is wonderfully diverse. We use different names and words to recognise and celebrate the differences that make us so diverse. But as soon as we start using those words and names to label people and limit their equal access to full recognition and honour in the community, we have mutated that recognition of diversity into a defence of exclusivity, and Jesus calls us to repent. And it is as a diverse community of the repentant that we gather here around God’s word and table, gay and straight and non-binary, married and unmarried and not yet allowed to be married, all gathered together in one body, and singing joyously, “Yes Lord, you have made them equal with us, and thanks be to God!”