

“High(er) Ways”

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 20:1-16

“So the Last will be first, and the first last”; Is 55:9 “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Matthew: 16

“My ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts” (Is 55:9). A couple of weeks ago on a Thursday our nation observed the thirteenth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. We remembered the day, thirteen years ago, when four hijacked planes crashed onto American soil, resulting in nearly three thousand deaths. Two planes crashed into the north and south World Trade Center Towers. A third plane crashed into the Pentagon while a fourth plane headed for Washington D.C., went down in a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania after passengers attempted to overtake the terrorist hijackers. This is an event that has left an indelible mark on all Americans. Even those who were not yet born or are too young to remember “where they were on 9/11,” are affected by the day and the events as parents, teachers, family members, and pastors pass on the stories and the memories. As Church attendance on the Sundays immediately following 9/11 increased over twenty percent (“9/11 In Numbers,” *The Guardian*, August 17, 2002), many people were left wondering how the Lord could allow this to happen. How could a good and gracious God possibly work out his goodness and grace through this kind of event?

As our nation was preparing three years ago for the *tenth* anniversary of 9/11, Barna Group research, a Christian-based research organization, published a curious finding that came from tracking spiritual behaviors since September 11. They found that while weekly church attendance in most of the country waned back to pre-9/11 percentages, Church participation in New York, the epicenter of the attacks, has steadily grown to forty-six percent today. In addition to worship attendance, several other measures of faith also showed increases among New Yorkers, including Bible reading, which grew from some 29 percent to 35 percent. Those who pray, read the Bible, and attend church in a typical week has increased from 17 percent of the population to 24 percent (“10th Anniversary Study: Faith in New York Since 9/11,” *Christian Post*, August 29, 2011). What man meant for evil, God worked out for his good Will. A statistic like this reminds us of a great truth that arose from our Scripture readings this morning: “*The ways of God and his reign in Christ here in this world are higher than our ways.*”

A tragic, national event like 9/11 also reminds us that there is a distinction between God’s *Will* and his *ways*. The *Will* of God is made known to us in Christ. God’s *Will* is that all people would repent, be reconciled to him and have faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. Yet, the *ways* in which God works in human lives and in this world to carry out his *Will* are often a mystery. So we can say with the prophet Isaiah,

“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:9).

The Gospel writer Matthew presents us this morning with the mysterious ways of God and his kingdom here on earth. In an effort to describe what the kingdom of God is like Jesus tells a story that just about gets under the skin of at least every single hard working American. Yet, Jesus insists that this parable reveals a greater truth about the ways in which God works out his plan of salvation in this world.

He tells us a story of a master who hired laborers for his vineyard early in the morning and agreed to pay them a denarius for the day, a common wage at the time for a day’s worth of labor. He then then sent them into the vineyard to work. Later he hired others, about the third hour of the day, or nine o’clock in the morning. He did the same at the sixth hour (twelve o’ clock), at the ninth hour (three o’clock in the afternoon), and even at the eleventh hour (five o’clock in the evening), the last hour of the day. When the owner of the vineyard paid the men he gave them all the same wage, beginning with the last ones hired, all the way to the first ones hired. Each worker received the same pay for the day even though they worked varying hours. Jesus finishes the parable by saying that “the first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Mt 20:16). This is the way of the kingdom of God. The same generosity of the master shown to all, even to those who seemingly don’t deserve it. This is the *way* God reveals his *Will* in Christ. The ways of a gracious God are certainly higher than our ways.

Now these higher ways of God are certainly not our ways, are they? No, “a worker deserves his wages.” “You get what you pay for and work for.” Those are my thoughts and ways. Those are the American ideals. Yet, the ways of God and his kingdom here on earth are much different. God’s ways often seem not to make much sense to us.

Many of us find ourselves trying to figure out the ways of God in our human experiences. We might want to know whether or not what we are supposed to do is part of God’s will or not. We try to reassure friends and relatives of God’s plan whenever something happens that does not appear to be part of our own plan for our own lives. And so we console ourselves with sayings like, “God knows what he is doing” and “He has a reason for everything.” Indeed, these are truths about God. He is in control of all things. Yet, I would like to suggest that these kinds of thoughts and sayings fail to distinguish between God’s *ways* and his *Will*. God has revealed his *Will* in his Son Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Yet, God has not revealed his *ways* to us. The ways in which he carries out his *Will* and plan in our lives is not made known to us.

The way that God works out his plan and brings his generous grace to all people may involve ways that seem difficult to us. His ways may involve allowing us to experience the effects of Sin and evil at work in this world through a 9/11 event, or perhaps a battle with cancer, a struggle with unemployment, rebellious children, or a difficult family member. The *Will* of God is to pour out his generous grace upon all people—“the first shall be last and the last shall be first.” Yet, the *ways* in which he carries out his

Will are not our ways. Indeed, *His ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts.*

Consider, from a human perspective, the odd ways in which God has worked out our salvation in the person and work of Christ. God's ways involved bringing the Son of God into the world through a poor, young woman in a place where animals eat and sleep in a small, insignificant, backwater village of Bethlehem. God worked out his Will in Christ by leading the Holy family into Egypt to avoid a bloodthirsty King named Herod bent on slaughtering every firstborn infant male in sight. The Will of God in Christ involved calling as his disciples a group of working class, rag tag fisherman, a tax collector, and a former persecutor of Christians, among the others. The working of God's salvation in this world involved the most humiliating, shameful, torturous death known to mankind. Yet, these are the *ways* of God at work in this world to bring salvation to the whole world. These are the ways, through water, bread, and wine, in which our God makes it possible for you to be called "first in the Kingdom of God."

We can question the *ways* of God. But let us trust more and more in his good and gracious character to work out all things through his own way toward his Will in Christ. His Will that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.