

**St. Mark's, Niagara on the Lake**  
**The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, year 'A' (proper 25)**  
**24 September 2023**  
**The Rev'd Leighton Lee**

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**THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL**

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Shortly after Rap musician Kendrick Lamar was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for music, Tim Page, a well-known music critic, wrote a snotty—or is it snooty?—post on social media. “As if pop music doesn’t have enough awards already,” he fulminated. He was incensed that an upstart with no conservatory training at all would take his place alongside composers like Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber, John Adams who had spent years honing and perfecting their craft. As if his inclusion would somehow tarnish or diminish the achievements of the others.

Closer to home, a friend became rector of a large and wealthy parish at a young age. She had some difficulty getting established since some people—mainly older clergy who wanted the job—believed she hadn’t paid her dues, despite being one of the few clergy I’ve ever known whose phone calls to the mayor were immediately answered. I never understood the jealousy, especially since the deference and power these jealous types are ostensibly thirsting after no longer accrues to those kinds of clerical preferments. Folks always want what others have—even if what they have is all they’re owed and all they need.

Which reminds me of one of the greatest film comedies of all time—at least, I think it is. Stanley Kramer’s 1963 madcap *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* is about a group of people who are in a race for buried treasure. The race is set in motion when a car, having recklessly passed five other cars on a twisting mountain road in Southern California, crashes through the guardrail and rolls down the hill. The five other cars pull over and the drivers go down to investigate. There they discover the driver of the wrecked car clinging to life. He tells them of \$250,000 buried under a big ‘W’ in a nearby state park.

At first, everyone tries to find a way to work together and divide the money in a fair way. Negotiations quickly get complicated, and the final solution, which is based on an elaborate system of shares, is not accepted by one of the characters because he’s a solo driver—every other car has at least two passengers. So even though he’ll receive \$64,000, he’s upset because, as he says, he “Still doesn’t get as much as everybody else.” A fight breaks out, everyone jumps back into the vehicles and ... the race is on.

But let’s leave that aside for the moment and think about miracles. We heard about one in our first reading: manna from heaven. And miracle cures—be they for weight loss, or clear skin, or financial solvency—abound these days. It’s not difficult to see

why. For one thing, people who are on the margins, or who have come to the end of their rope, people who are emotionally vulnerable, spiritually depleted, or looking for hope, have a tendency to grab hold of any promise, any chance at a miracle—no matter how far-fetched it may be. Their desperation or unhappiness makes them easy targets for theatrical charlatans whose offers of a better life are nothing more than the empty promises of the rapacious opportunist.

It's bad enough when such empty promises are peddled by advertisers and Hollywood. But it's way worse when they're proffered by the demagogues of the current political climate who offer false hope by telling folks their problems are all because of other people—less deserving people—have been given what should have rightfully been theirs.

“Take what belongs to you and go,” the owner of the vineyard says in this morning's parable. But so often we're not satisfied with what belongs to us—we're driven by envy and competitiveness to go and try to get what someone else has. Our history is rife with stories of things—be it land, or religious artifacts, or works of art—or, most shamefully, people—which were taken either by subterfuge or by force.

It's this kind of attitude Jesus is talking about in this morning's gospel. He's talking about both jealousy and a sense of entitlement. The workers were outraged that those who had worked for a mere hour would get the same wage as those who had worked for the whole day. “But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’”

The laborers in the vineyard probably had no expectation of work that day. The offer dropped down them like manna from heaven and yet they were outraged if the same thing happened to someone else even though there was clearly plenty to go around. The same thing is true for the characters in the movie. None of them got up in the morning expecting a windfall yet when they heard about it, sharing fair-or-square just wasn't possible. As ABBA sang, “The Winner Takes it All.”

Except life isn't about winning. Or if it is, it's about the kind of winning that's known in the love that gives itself away for the sake of the other. Imagine what would have happened if, instead of grumbling, the workers who had been there all day welcomed the newcomers in the recognition that they were all in it together? What if one of the fictional travellers bowed out of the furious competition, wished the others luck, and went on their way? Which leaves you and me. What if, instead of living with resentment and jealousy we finally learned to live with gratitude? Not gratitude for the comforts and luxuries we enjoy, but gratitude that we can take what we've been given—the liberating gospel of redemptive love—and can go. And freely share it, down to the very last—and latest—person. After all, there's more than enough to go around. Which tells us that miracles can—and still do—happen.