

Sermon
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 24th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [EXODUS 16:2-15; PSALM 105:1-6, 37-45; PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30;](#)
[MATTHEW 20:1-16](#)

“Feed the good wolf”. This is a phrase that my husband Randy and I say to each other when we find our perspectives clouded by anger or envy. When we find ourselves fixated on feelings of resentment or self-pity. The phrase is our reminder of a story that Randy heard years ago about two wolves that exist inside all of us. Perhaps you know, it. It goes something like this:

We all have two wolves battling inside us. One is bad. This wolf is anger, envy, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.

You will likely be wondering “Which wolf wins?” And the answer is: “The one that you feed.”

Feed the good wolf. Our readings this morning invite us to consider which wolf we feed in our thoughts, and words, and actions. These readings don't ask us to deny that there are two wolves. God doesn't ask us to pretend that we never feel angry; that we never experience envy or resentment. In our reading from Exodus we are offered a vivid example of the human capacity for those kinds of feelings. A vivid example of the human tendency to fixate on the negative – to feed the bad wolf – and to complain. We hear that the whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron. God has brought them out of slavery in Egypt, yet at the first pangs of hunger the Israelites recall their slave rations and wonder if that might not be better than all the unknowns they are experiencing in the wilderness. Hearing this is not an opportunity for us to feel superior to the Israelites: pat ourselves on the back thinking that we would never have complained. No – the two wolves are in all of us, and God's invitation is not to deny the presence of both, but to feed

the good wolf. Just as God responded to the Israelites complaining, God's grace, active in our lives, continues to nudge us toward nourishing joy, nurturing empathy and fostering love.

In writing to the Philippians Paul is faced with a decision that relates to the two wolves. Writing from prison, Paul longs for God's heavenly realm. He longs to be with God, without persecution, yet realizes that his vocation is to nurture the Philippian community. He is reminded that heaven can wait, and that earth with both good and bad, is the place he must now serve God. We are called not only to feed our own "good wolves", but also to nurture and nourish the good in others. We are called to offer love, and kindness, and grace and humility to others when we see that they are struggling.

And, our Gospel passage today. The parable of the workers in the vineyard. Just as in our story from Exodus, and in the excerpt from the Letter to the Philippians, this parable is an invitation to consider the two wolves in all of us. Just as we are, in our humanity, not so different from the complaining Israelites in the desert, we might not be so different in our initial reactions to the first workers who grumbled when

they received the same wage as those who had worked only an hour. This parable shines a light on those “bad wolf” feelings that are in all of us.

What we see, as each of the workers is paid, is an example of what can happen when we compare ourselves to others. How many of the “bad wolf” feelings that I listed arise out of comparisons? Resentment? Envy? Superiority? Inferiority? This habit of establishing a sense of ourselves against an external reference – against someone else – comes from a place deep in our humanity. We are happy with our home...until we visit a friend's home and begin to make comparisons. We are content in our relationship...until we compare ourselves to the other couples we know and wonder if they are happier. We love our children...but wonder if they would be better-rounded if we had them in as many activities as their friends seem to be in. Or, the other way around...we witness someone make a mistake and feel a wave of relief that we are smarter than that, that we make better choices.

Comparisons like this feed the “bad wolf”. We don’t know all that much about the workers who received a denarius for only an hour’s work. We don’t know what difference that denarius made in their lives. Even if the parable did include that information, it’s only one perspective. We can only ever know what people share and make visible on the outside. And so, comparisons are at best, not terribly accurate, and at worst, damaging and destructive for us and others.

As I said last week, a parable is not the same as an allegory. Parables are meant to make us puzzle and wonder and, in that puzzling and wondering we are changed, we are transformed.

In this parable of the workers in the vineyard, we can go to a dualistic, binary place. We can focus on what’s “right” and what’s “wrong” in this situation in the vineyard? Who is right? Who is wrong? Or, we can hold the situation and let it stretch us, and transform us.

I came across a podcast this week that uses the story of the two wolves as a starting point for meaningful conversations about how we navigate this life: it’s called “The One You Feed”. I listened to the host, Eric Zimmer, in conversation with Richard Rohr.

Richard Rohr often writes about how faith is about how we are changed, not about how we are to change others. He points out that the first words Jesus preached invite those gathered, and us, into change. It's translated "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near", but this doesn't do justice to what Jesus was saying. The word that is translated "repent" is *metanoia*. In English, repentance implies that we've done something wrong and we must regretfully renounce that action and live in a new way. The word *metanoia* has much wider connotations. As you may know, it comes from two Greek words: *meta*, meaning above, and *nous*, meaning mind. *Metanoia* invites us to move above our normal instincts into a bigger mind. It invites us into a change of mind, a different way of seeing things, and it invites us to meet all situations, however unfair they may seem, with an empathetic heart.

This parable is an opportunity to move above our normal instincts into a bigger mind. An opportunity to see that, as I said, we don't know that much about the workers who were paid so generously for only an hour's labour. It's an opportunity to consider the posture of the

vineyard owner – a posture an open heart that treated the labourers who had not been hired with an open, generous heart, and with open hands that weren't gripping that money too tightly.

The “good wolf” feelings – joy, peace, love, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion – these feelings are not rooted in comparisons with a view to establishing status. These feelings remind us that our posture as Christians is one with open hearts, and hands. The “good wolf” feeling revolve around relationship, but they don't set us against one another. The “good wolf” feelings stretch us. They ask us to transcend those “bad wolf” feelings and to seek to see situations in new ways. This transcending and seeking changes our minds, and it changes us.

Richard Rohr says that daily prayer is like a body-mind-spirit scan. It's an opportunity for us to pause and consider which wolf we are feeding. Have we been feeding the bad wolf? Is it that wolf that is behind our actions and decisions? Prayer is an opportunity to move into a bigger mind, and a new way of seeing things. Gathering here on a Sunday is another opportunity to do that. It's an opportunity to

feast on the love, and joy and hope and generosity that nourish and sustain the good wolf. May we leave here reminded of this, and may the good wolf be the one we feed today, and always. Amen.