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## *I AM ... May You Be!*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell  
Proper 16 – Year A**

*[unedited transcript:]*

They grumbled. They had gotten up early that morning, they had gone to the marketplace, they had been in the field all day long in the scorching sun, and now they stood waiting to be paid. As they stood, they saw others who had not gotten up early, who had not been out all day and yet we're getting paid the same thing that they did. It wasn't fair and they grumbled. You know grumbling, I'll bet. That slow, growing, growling noise. It quickly becomes a murmur as more and more people pick up on it. It's a fundamental complaint of being treated unfairly and usually by God.

Now it's not the same as a complaint. It's not the same as feeling grief or knowing you're in trouble or lamenting a loss. That's a totally different thing. Grumbling is a complaint about God. It's a sense that you are being unfairly treated, that your worth is not being adequately recognized. Now the Bible warns us about grumbling. It was the grumbling and murmuring of the Israelites in the desert that draws Moses's Iyer. James tells us not to do it. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, tells us not to do it. The fourth gospel tells us not to do it. Grumbling is a problem because it separates you from God. It is, I think, the sound of holding on too tightly.

C.S. Lewis provides a powerful example of the problem with grumbling. In his book *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis has going from Hell into a vacation in Heaven. George McDonald, the mystic poet, is his guide. C.S. Lewis asked about a woman who seems to be a grumbler. There she is, just grumbling all the time, but the grumbling doesn't seem like such a problem to Louis, so we ask McDonald, "Why is she in Hell?" She's just grumbling, but she's a decent person. McDonald says, "Ah, the question is not whether she's a grumbler. The question is whether she's a grumble. Has she been grumbling for so long and so completely and so deeply that she's simply a grumble now?" That's what we need to know, and that's the challenge of grumbling.

Do you wind up being in Hell as you walk around on your vacation in heaven, but I think this parable, this parable of the land of the workers and the land owner actually has a lot to say about grumbling and why we do it. You see, usually when we're holding on too tightly it's because we are holding onto the wrong things. For example, you can see where these laborers felt they should be treated specially. Their worth, if you will, was about their diligence in being in the marketplace, about their work ethic and having been in the fields all day, about their deserving to be special and not leveled or compared as being the same with these other people, and so they grumbled, but what does that have to say to us about how we ought to be?

Because you see, I think we know something about this dynamic. This idea that we are actually something special. Typically, there's something about us that we think is deserving of being special, being treated as more worthy than someone else and if we're not careful, we'll get trapped in that. We'll feel threatened when it is threatened and we fail to see who we really are. For example, let's try a practice. I want you to think about how you define yourself. I want you to think about who you think you are. You might say, I am tall, dark and handsome. It's okay. You can have that thought too, or you might describe yourself by your roles. I'm a father, I'm a mother, I'm a son, I'm a daughter, I'm a friend, or maybe your occupation. I'm a teacher, I'm a laborer, I am a manufacturer or maybe by some of the feelings that you have. I'm honest or I desire justice or I'm a little defensive, or maybe by the class you're in. I'm a member of the Episcopal Church, I live in a particular neighborhood, I went to a particular school.

Most of us take these descriptions of ourselves, our personality, if you will, and treat them as if they are us, and

they are us to a certain extent, they're just not all of us. The challenge of thinking that they are all of us is that we are incredibly threatened whenever they are not treated as being special. Most of us go on with these, I am statements until we can find some combination of things that we think other people don't have. Then if we're not careful, we'll find ourselves in conversations or dreaming even about other people, trying to distinguish which of our characteristics are not held by them. We know who we are only if we can identify that we are not the other person and that they are not us.

That leads to grumbling, of course. This sense that whenever one of those descriptions, whenever one of those elements of our personality, is not treated as unique and special that somehow we are not treated as unique and special. Now go back through your list of descriptors and with each one, imagine that you are not that. You are not tall, dark and handsome. You are short. You are not a mother or a father. You are not a manufacturer or a teacher or a laborer. You do not belong to this club, live in this neighborhood or even belong to this admittedly wonderful church. As you go through each of these things, you will see that I am is still there. You are still there. As you imagine yourself as not these descriptors that many of us have come to play so much importance upon, you will see that there is an I am that remains.

This, I believe, is the same I am that God described himself as being to Moses. You remember on the mountain, Moses says, "Who shall I tell them sent me?" God said, "I am as I am." That I am is a deep presence of the divine within us. It is the us that is looking at us. The observer. Part of our practices, our prayer, our worship is about getting more deeply into ourselves. Understanding that the real self is not this individual expression of these descriptors. They're part of us to be sure that's how our ego manifests itself in the world and we should be attentive to them, but they are not all of us. There is a deeper self behind those descriptors. There's a deeper self that will continue to be, even if those descriptors are not. We are not an individual manifestation of those descriptions. That's just our personality. We are something deeper than that. We are not an individual manifestation. We are a person; a person who is a child of God.

Now there is a moment, if you continue this practice, and I really do suggest you do it, there is a moment when you began to feel that presence of God that dwells within you. When you do, you will feel a flip. You will feel a change of energy. The energy that you previously devoted to protecting those descriptions, to arguing for your force of personality to try to present yourself as being someone that's worthy of recognition, that energy will be available to you. You no longer need to do that.

You recognize those descriptors for what they are; both the good and the bad. They're not you. The deeper you, the child of God, is the end dwelling presence of the divine within you. As you learn to identify that with yourself, you'll find a new energy when you can come to the I am that is not only God but you, the awareness that lets you participate in the world, you will feel a new energy, but this energy won't be dedicated to the maintenance of your exterior. This energy will be dedicated to the care for other people. The spaciousness that you experience in yourself will become the spaciousness you create for other people to be themselves.

What you will discover is that they are not separate from you. The I am that you have identified yourself to be is not important because it's not them. It's important because it is them. It is connected to them. They are the same at core child of God that you are. A different individual expression of these descriptors to be sure, but the person there is a child of God, just as you are, and our natural inclination will be to feel compassion for them, to feel empathy for them, to reach out, to create space so they can be who they are.

Now let's go back to the parable. What if that had been the reaction instead of the grumble? What if instead of seeing those other laborers as somebody different who was given special privileges that you, though you should have gotten more, did not receive? You got what you bargained for. You were treated fairly, you were simply subject to envy. In the scripture, the landowner looks at those who came out first and says, "Do you have an evil eye?" Which is to say, has envy overtaken you? I am good, but if you could feel the energy of reaching out to those other people, if you could get into your I am, what you would experience is a feeling that Beatrice Bruteau, a mystical writer, describes as may you be. To touch the I am is to feel a release of energy that says, may you be to others. Because to sense the indwelling God in us is to give life. That's what God does.

When God creates us in his image and likeness, he gives us the power to create life too and we do that through our compassion, through our empathy, through our creation of space for other people to be who they are. I imagine that if this were true, the parable would have turned out much differently. Instead of the grumbling, that sense that we've been treated unfairly, there would be a joy, a bliss, because what's really happened is you got what you needed and so did they.

I don't know why they weren't at the marketplace early that morning. I don't know why they couldn't work all

day. Maybe they simply couldn't. Maybe they had other obligations. What I do know is they got a daily wage, which is two or three days of food for their families. Something that is exciting, something that ought to make us feel good. I think to find the I am that is the end welling presence and to experience that outpouring of energy, which is may you be, is to be excited and happy that these other people too got what they needed. Their persons were fed and in doing so, they were loved because I believe it is only when we are loved that we learn how to love.

I am, may you be. That is the spiritual path. Try the practice. Try thinking about all of those descriptors that you think of yourself as being, and then negate each one of them. Do it until you begin to sense that there is a you behind all of that. There is a you tied to indwelling presence of God that is deeper and more powerful than all of that and see if there's not a flip. See if the energy doesn't change from defending who you think you are to being present to others and see if in doing that you don't have a new understanding of what joy or bliss actually means.

Whenever you see grumbling, pay attention, because that's about us. That grumbling is simply an indication that we are trapped in those descriptors, in that false sense of who we are and there is a deeper, true self that through practices we can find and experience and participate in, and in doing so we will be finding and experiencing and participating in the divine presence, which will give us a new energy that says, may you be, I am, may you be. Amen.