

Sermon: Pentecost XV: Proper 20

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Year A

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

So what's fair about that? Most of us have heard many sermons on this parable, but stay with me. I get up early, wash my face, comb my hair, put on clean, neat clothes and go stand on the corner ready to be hired to work for the day. A landowner comes along and hires me along with others to go work in the vineyard today offering the going wage for a day's labor. I'm thankful I got an early start so I can get a full day's pay. Mid morning I notice some new workers have joined us in our labor. It happens again at noon, then three pm, and then with just one hour to go more workers show up. At the end of the day we line up for our pay; and the landowner begins by paying the latest workers first, and they are being paid what I was promised. I'm thinking, "Wow! I'm going to have a feast tonight!" But when it gets to me, I'm given what was promised to me – the same amount as the slackers! Now I admit there could have been a lot of reasons why those later workers weren't there to start at the beginning of the day, some legitimate and some maybe not so legitimate. I object, and the landowner says he gave me what I had been promised. I know, but that's just not fair. But then again, I have to agree that the landowner, well – who could ask for a better boss? Compassionate and forgiving for the workers who came later. But he **could** have given me a little more than the latecomers.

And I love that our Old Testament lesson is from Jonah. Here is Jonah, sitting up on the hillside, pouting, angry, and looking down on the city of Nineveh. He didn't want to warn them in the first place. They were evil people and deserved to die, but then when our reading says, '...they turned from their evil ways God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.' So there sits Jonah on that hill – **Mad!** Not fair.

Now I know in our Gospel reading this is a parable; Jesus was teaching a truth with something his listeners were familiar with. But what's fair about it? I've always wanted things to be fair. Would you believe I used to count out m&m's for my four kids so they would all get the same amount? No kidding, I did. As a child I remember saying to my dad, "But it's not fair!" And he would say, "Barbara, the world's not fair." I can't say exactly when it started, but later than I'd like to admit, gray started creeping into my black and white world. All things were NOT either black or white, right or wrong.

So you see where I'm going? I think Jesus' parables can teach us more than one moral. I'm a cradle Christian, baptized as an infant, sinned a lot, strayed some, (not for long), and have had a lifelong journey with my Lord. Some may not have had that

privilege. Maybe they didn't hear about God and Jesus as children like I did; maybe some Christian came along and introduced them and they became believers, even joined a church, and started telling others about God. Then there may be others who spent their lives not wanting to 'give up' their pleasures, only to believe on their deathbed. God takes us all. The latecomers missed out on all the joys of the lifelong faith journey, but they enjoyed the pleasure of being included in the end. Maybe those five o'clock workers were all the last remnants.

That's one thought. Here's another: What about the soul who never heard about God? Here all us believers are sailing along, experiencing the joy of having a relationship with God and these souls didn't get that opportunity. And then there are the souls who have denied that there even is a God. And then there are the ones who have committed such heinous crimes that it's hard to imagine them having a chance. What if our God is so full of love, that in spite of giving us all 'free will' that God in his infinite wisdom has it all worked out that the last one in is given the opportunity to receive the full reward? Scripture tells us 'God is love'. And maybe **that** is what this parable is about. Richard Gribble, a Roman Catholic priest, writes, "God doesn't measure out a calculated portion of divine grace, but liberally grants gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, joy and happiness....humans **must** not limit God."

As I prepared for this sermon, I talked to various people about what they thought this parable meant. I'd like to give you the one final spin on the parable that brought me up short. My daughter-in-law, Marianne brought me this book, *Satisfied* by Jeff Manion. He uses the 'Conflict in the Vineyard' in his book. He writes this story: "Matt and Alicia survey the shaded backyard to determine the ideal location for a swing set. Their first child is due in three months, and they share immense gratification over buying their first house. After living in a cramped apartment for four years, they finally amassed enough cash for a down payment in a quaint neighborhood. Alicia becomes giddy whenever she utters the words "our house."

"Closing on the property and moving in was just the beginning. Though the structure is sound, the home is dowdy. Definitely dated. Tired. The kitchen pleads for updating, the landscaping suffers from neglect, and the carpet has seen better days. Matt has three months to transform a dark, wood-paneled den into a cheery baby's bedroom. But these other cosmetic improvements can be made over time as money becomes available.

"It's Friday evening. They walk the dozen feet to their detached garage, which houses their aging but reliable car. The absence of any recent automotive repair increases their sense of gratitude. As they pull away from their treasured home, they share deep thankfulness for what God has provided – a strong sensation that God, in his goodness, has blessed them immensely. They feel full. They feel rich.

“Their destination is a short, fifteen-minute drive to the home of friends they haven’t seen since college graduation. They obediently follow the turns directed by their GPS. The staccato female voice guides them to a cul-de-sac with newer houses and the manicured front yard of their friends’ house. The door to the attached garage is open, displaying two newer vehicles. Initial hugs and greetings at the front door segue into a quick tour. The entryway reveals an open floor plan, the smartly decorated living area flowing seamlessly into the kitchen, which hosts stainless steel appliances amid granite countertops. Alicia admires, “What a beautiful kitchen.” Matt wonders, “How in the world are they affording this?” Upstairs are the bedrooms with a master suite and walk-in closets.

“It’s a beautiful evening, and they enjoy an unrushed dinner together on the cobblestone patio in the backyard. The patio furniture does not appear to have been purchased at a garage sale.

“Three hours later, Matt and Alicia climb into their faithful car and return home. The ride is a bit subdued. They pull into their driveway feeling...well, feeling poor. Gone is the sense of fullness they experienced just a few hours before. In fact, there is an inner suspicion that God has ripped them off.

“Okay, what just happened? How can the heart shift from deep gratitude to subtle resentment in three short hours? [Manion asks] The answer – in a word – is *comparison*.” Manion goes on to say that “...comparison is a thief and a killer. Comparison robs you of gratitude and contentment.” Isn’t that what happened in the vineyard. I was more than willing to work the whole day for a fair wage until I saw the latecomers getting a much higher hourly wage than I. Then I started comparing. Aren’t we all inclined to compare? I am blessed beyond measure. When we start comparing, it leads us down a dark path. How about you? Ask yourself, ‘Am I comparing or am I feeling blessed?’

Amen.