

September 24, 2017  
Pentecost 16  
Jonah 3:10 – 4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16  
The Generous Landowner  
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Gracia y paz del Dios, Padre, + Hijo, e Espíritu Santo

It's not fair! Oh how often I uttered those words as a child. The youngest of seven children, with five older brothers, there was no fairness in the distribution of household responsibilities and especially there was no fairness in the freedoms allowed "the boys" versus the restrictions placed on this "baby sister".

The boys had paper routes, I didn't even have a bicycle. The boys could play with friends after dark, I wasn't allowed to go out after supper. It all seemed so unfair so arbitrary – so unjust. I wanted what my brothers had.

Today we are confronted with that same self-centered grumbling from the prophet Jonah and from the day-laborers in Matthew's parable of the Generous Landowner.

Jonah, the petulant prophet is sulking under a tree. Why? Because God is a gracious god. And Jonah KNOWS it! God's mercy and grace are free to Jonah AND to the Assyrians.

The parable of the generous landowner upends the social and economic structure of 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine AND our 21<sup>st</sup> century free market economy. "The kingdom of heaven is like." God's economy! Not human notions of fairness. Jesus' parables in this gospel illustrate the radical, even scandalous nature of God's kingdom contrasted with the kingdom of earth.

The scene of this parable is the city marketplace, not unlike, say Pioneer Courthouse Square. In the center of town, every day men and some women would gather in hopes of being hired, even for a few hours. Usually the landowners' managers would come to hire enough workers for the day. In this story, it is the landowner who comes to the square to do the hiring that, in itself sounds radical and scandalous to those who hear this parable.

The landowner makes a deal with these laborers for their pay. The landowner returns to the square four more times throughout the day, hiring additional workers. To the second group he promises "just pay", to the third and fourth group he promises the same. To the final group, he promises nothing. Every one of these workers is thrilled to have a job, even for only a day, or a few hours, or even just ONE hour.

When the workday is complete, everyone is paid. And here is where we are introduced to God's economy. Those who came last are paid first. Unheard of!

And they are paid a FULL day's wage. Scandalous!

As each group is paid, those who worked ALL day must have begun hoping even EXPECTING that they would be paid more than those who came later. It's only fair! They worked longer, harder and in the scorching heat. It is obvious they have earned more, they deserve more, yes, they are certainly ENTITLED to more! And they are horrified and angry when they are paid exactly the same as those who came last. They grumble against the landowner. Listen to what they say

"you paid them as though they were equal to us".

Humans don't like being measured equally. We define ourselves by what we do, the way we look, the amount of money we have, the car we drive. Either we measure up to impossible standards, or we don't. Marcus Borg called this the "Three As" of life: Affluence, Attractiveness and Achievement. But that is not how God's economy works. And we in this century are STILL surprised by God's economy!

Jesus changed the rules about labor, income, productivity and wealth. The kingdom of God is not an industrialized society where hours and minutes are exchanged for dollars and cents. The work of God's kingdom is not a commodity to be exchanged for "fair compensation".

In the gospel story, the landowner's response to the first laborers shifts our perspective from the capitalist idea of personal wealth and achievement to the needs of all. The landowner is eager to make the vineyard as productive as possible. That is just one of the reasons he goes back to the marketplace to hire more workers. He is focused on profit and loss AND he is focused on getting as many people as possible in the harvest. Without faulting the later workers for not coming sooner the landowner recognizes that every worker has the same basic life needs, no matter when they came to the task.

Everyone needs the same food and shelter. Everyone needs to provide for their families. By paying the later workers the same as the early ones, the landowner affirms their basic needs, dignity and worth. All are invited to be fully a part of the kingdom of God.

Instead of grumbling, the early workers might have rejoiced that they have been paid a fair wage and that their sisters and brothers are cared for equally.

But, doggone it – that's just not fair! Those who put in a full day should not be penalized, they should be rewarded!

Several months ago I went to the Tigard City Council open meeting to give testimony on an issue important to the faith community. There were more than a dozen two minute testimonies given. I noticed something strange. Each person introduced themselves in this way: My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I've been a Tigard resident for X number of years. As if to say, "I've been here longer than you, I have more right to speak" We claim that same privilege all too often in God's kingdom. Sunday after Sunday we gather here to worship taking pride in the number of years we have faithfully given our time and talents and treasure to this church – God's church – And now this new pastor is telling us that we are no more precious to God than those slackers who are sitting at home watching football or mowing the lawn one last time before it rains.

Sisters and brothers, this is the scandal of the gospel of Jesus Christ, this is the heart of God's economy.

Everyone, absolutely everyone receives God's mercy, grace and justice because of Jesus Christ.

No one EARNs God's grace

No one is ENTITLED to God's grace,

Yet God showers his abundant mercy on ALL of creation, humans, animals, plants, trees, crops, . everything!

What would happen if we lived as though the kingdom of God has REALLY come near to us? What would happen if we lived this Psalm of praise – extolling our God and King – every day blessing and praising God's name. What would happen if we declare God's mighty acts to one another? What would happen if we celebrate and sing of God's abundant goodness and righteousness, . out there where everyone will hear it? What would happen if we went about living God's scandalous economy in a world that has not experienced equity? The change that you experience may surprise you. The change may happen in YOU!

Thanks be to God!