

September 24, 2017
Pentecost 16
Jazz Vespers Worship
Jonah 3:10 – 4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16
The Generous Landowner
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Drive by the corner of Martin Luther King Jr, Blvd and NE Everett Street any day, Monday through Saturday between 7am and 2pm. There at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Worker Center you will see men and women waiting to be hired for day jobs. The Center's website describes the workers as: *day laborers . . . men and women of all trades and experiences. They are workers who are committed members of our community . . .*

The first to arrive are often the first hired. If there is still work available, the later arrivals may get picked up.

Many of the day laborers are undocumented immigrants. Most are men and women of color. Some have criminal records. They are in need of respect, honest employment and "just compensation". Yet there are people, people we know, and maybe sometimes we, ourselves –who would deride these laborers as lazy, illegals, drug addicts, moochers who deserve no special attention. They could find a job and be more like us if they wanted to, right? They only work enough to buy their next pack of cigarettes or bottle of beer.

The laborers in our parable, today are in the same boat. They do not own their own land. They depend on wealthy landowners to give them work. They wait in the public square, seen by all who pass by, to be chosen. Some wait all day. I wonder how the landowner chooses who to hire. The strongest, the cleanest, the most reliable-looking? The work is progressing slowly. It doesn't look like it will be completed by day's end. The landowner keeps coming back to the square for more workers.

Let's imagine for a moment: The first workers turned out to be slow or unskilled, so the landowner has to get more workers to pick up the pace. He goes back again and again, five times, looking for enough workers to finish the job. Maybe, the last workers turned out to be the best workers and that's why they got paid the same as the first workers. Or maybe the landowner had planned to pay everyone the same from the outset.

See, the whole point of this parable is to upend our definition of what is fair. This is a parable about God's abundant grace and mercy. It is a radical expression of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is meant to disrupt and disturb, not to comfort and console. The early workers make that clear as they grumble against the landowner's decision to pay the last first and to pay them the full day's wage: "you have made them equal to us". Their words illuminate their sense of entitlement and jealousy. The landowner calls them on their jealousy in a surprising way. He does not ask if they are jealous of the other workers.

He asks, "Are you envious because I am generous?" (Verse 15). The literal translation of this question is a Greek idiom which asks: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" Did you ever get "the evil eye" from one of your parents? Did you ever give "the evil eye" to one of your kids? The "evil eye" in Middle Eastern culture is very different from the "stink eye" you got from mom. In Greek: *ophthalmos poneros*, evil eye, suggests a deeper problem than meets the eye. Jesus tells us earlier in this gospel, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy *ophthalmos poneros*; if you have the "evil eye", your whole body will be full of darkness". In this text, the use of the phrase "evil eye" illustrates the opposite of generosity. *Ophthalmos poneros* fills us with jealousy and greed. The evil eye makes us stingy and self-centered.

The kingdom of God has no room for self-centered jealousy. The kingdom of God is a place where all are welcome. If you come often or it is your first time, you are welcome. If you are struggling with the words or know them by heart, you are welcome. If this is a familiar and comfortable place or if you feel awkward and out of place, you are welcome. God's grace is for you

And you

And you

And you

The last, the first, the in between...

The Lutheran, the Catholic, the Evangelical the none-of-the-above.

The fairness of the kingdom of God is on display today.

It looks strange to us! Just as it did to our 1st century sisters and brothers. The kingdom of heaven is like . . . radical and scandalous equity for everyone!

Thanks be to God!