

***Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York  
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York  
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*Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 20A – September 20, 2020  
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Psalm 145:1-8, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16*

*Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN*

We meet the characters of the parable Jesus tells in our Gospel text for today early in the morning – at dawn. There is the owner of a vineyard, who needed to hire workers, probably to harvest grapes. And there were laborers. There was always a supply of day laborers at the market, so he goes there and agrees with the people present that he'll pay the usual daily wage, one denarius for their day's work. Commentators differ, but this wage is understood to have been enough to feed a family for anywhere from one day to up to three to six days. (Lose, David, ...in the Meantime, "Pentecost 16: Not About Deserving," <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/09/pentecost-16-a-not-about-deserving/>; Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus*, Harper One, (New York: 2014), p. 207.)

Now, the vineyard owner seems to need more workers, so he goes out again at nine o'clock and hires more laborers, assuring them that he'll pay them what is right for their work. We're not told why, but he goes out again at noon, once more at 3:00 in the afternoon, and finally, one last time at 5:00 p.m., again telling them that he'll pay them what is right.

At the end of the workday, 6:00 in the evening, he tells his manager to settle accounts, and the people who came to work last and worked only one hour are paid first – with a full day's wage. We don't learn their response, but the people who were hired twelve hours earlier see this and conclude that they're going to be paid commensurately with those who received a denarius for only one hour's work. When they receive the same denarius for their twelve hours of labor, they are unhappy, saying "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." They resent the vineyard owner's generosity to the workers who had a shorter day.

But the vineyard owner isn't sympathetic: the first hired laborers received what they agreed to take for the day's work. Just because he is more generous to those who worked a shorter day doesn't mean that he's done them wrong.

This parable tends to offend **our** sensibilities, in addition to those of the first hired laborers. Our society has taught us that people should be paid “fairly,” receiving equal pay for equal work. And the application of that principle says that if we’ve worked more hours than another person, we should receive more money than they do. But remember the first line of Jesus’ story: “The kingdom of heaven is like a **landowner** who... .” (MT 20:1.) It’s not society that we look to here; it’s not fair labor standards that Jesus is talking about; it’s the kingdom of heaven. And what’s “right” is determined differently in heaven than on earth.

The laborers who were hired later in the day, not through any fault of their own (they were still standing in the market at 5:00 p.m. because no one had hired them. (MT 20:6-7.) But they still needed to earn a living to support their families. So, in the economy of the kingdom of heaven in which people receive according to their **needs**, the 5:00 p.m. hires are paid what they need to feed their families, even if they didn’t work the whole day. This treatment was not **equal**, it was **equitable**. Although each person was given the same amount, they hadn’t all **earned** the same amount, if we consider the amount of time they’d worked. But they were given what they **needed**. That was **more** than equal; it was equitable.

This recalls the Freedom Dividend campaign of former presidential candidate Andrew Yang to pay all people in the United States \$1,000 a month. That wouldn’t have been enough to live on, but it would have been a start at making sure that everyone has the income they need to live decently. We approached that goal again with the \$1,200 per person payment that all people in the United States received, along with enhanced unemployment benefits when the pandemic hit full force in March. We were told to stay home, but businesses that functioned only in person needed workers to be present, so they were laid off and they received benefits when they were unemployed. We learned – at least for a time – that benefits could be given to people without their having to work for them.

It also recalls the work, both as a litigator and as a jurist, of the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Her focus was on correcting injustices in laws and practices that prevented men and women from being treated the same; as equals.

And it calls us back to the Black Lives Matter movement, in which hundreds of thousands of people in our country are demanding the same treatment of all people by the police in every jurisdiction, regardless of the color of our skin.

Many people seem to see the world as a place of finite benefits. That is, if one person receives more, that must mean that another receives less. I think this is the basis for the unrest among some white men who fear that the gains made by people

other than those who look like them will necessarily mean that they will have less. They fear earning less than they used to, if people of color and white women, and people who identify as neither strictly male nor female receive more than they used to. And, like the people of Jesus' parable hired by the vineyard owner at 6:00 a.m., they are resentful of the good fortune of other people. They begrudge the benefits experienced by people who historically have been undercompensated.

Resentment about other people receiving something – whether we receive the same thing or not – is an unfortunate human trait. We hear it in the first lesson today when Jonas complains to God about not destroying Ninevah for their sins after they had repented. Jonah's assessment of the people of that city was that they were undeserving of **any** benefit, **any** concession, **any** act of grace because they had been the Israelites' enemy for many years. When God told Jonah that the Ninevites wouldn't be destroyed because they had heard the word Jonah preached to them, he "became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. (Jonah 4:1-2.) But Jonah could have looked upon his mission as having been successful. He could have interpreted the Ninevites' repenting their past behavior as "a win" for himself. Instead, he grew angry at their good fortune.

And not only is Jonah angry with God, but he's so distraught that he finds no purpose to go on living: "And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." (4:3.) Why can't he find joy in the outcome of his work? Why can't he accept God's forgiveness of the people of Ninevah?

Some say that the book of Jonah is a satire because the characters behave so extremely. But it also points to the human tendency to be self-centered and to resent others receive benefits; to begrudge them their good fortune. This attitude seems to stem from the fear I described before – that there just isn't enough good fortune to go around. But that idea is exactly **contrary** to what God has told us through millennia of stories in scripture of God's relationship with people. That's precisely the opposite of Jesus' stories **and actions**. For example, the feeding, not once, but twice, of tens of thousands of people from what would have been one simple meal; the turning of water into gallons and gallons of the finest wine; the healing of people who had long-standing disabilities and chronic illnesses; and the return of life to others. How could there be a limited amount of benefit for people if Jesus provided this abundance?

How can we, as a society (but to begin with, as the church on earth), step out of our insecurities and fears to place ourselves in the shoes of others, so that we can rejoice in their good fortune and celebrate the fullness of their lives? How can we allow ourselves to open to God's goodness so that we live, not just for ourselves, but for humanity?

*Let us pray.* Merciful and gracious God, pry our stubbornness out of our souls. Train us to embody the generosity of Jesus. Teach us to love all of the creation in which you have placed us. Lead us to accept your abundance in our lives and the world. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C:**  
**Amen**