

**Proper 20A – September 21, 2014**  
**Exodus 16:2-15 (Jonah 3:10-4:11); Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45; Philipians 1:21-30;**  
**Matthew 20:1–16**

**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

Today we hear some stories about how God's generous mercy often violates or collides with our sense of fairness and just reward. These stories are told so that if we can come to understand our merciful God, we may then celebrate someone else's good fortune, deserved or undeserved, as if it were our own—and work toward the wellbeing of those with bad or no fortune at all.

Today we have two—actually, three—amusing stories about grousing: first, the Israelites in the wilderness complaining about their slim rations and then receiving generous portions of meat and manna from God, and then *still* complaining; second, in the other Old Testament reading also assigned for today, there's the prophet Jonah bellyaching under his withered bush; and then, in Matthew's gospel, we hear Jesus' parable of the laborers grumbling about their pay. The first story from the book of Exodus is a wonderful story of God's steadfast love for an often contentious people. But today I want to share a bit more about this other reading, about the reluctant and contentious prophet Jonah. In the story of Jonah, you'll recall that "God changed his mind" about destroying Nineveh, and that gets Jonah so angry that he prays to die on the spot. "Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks Jonah, not once but twice, questioning Jonah's view of how the world should be run.

All of us, at one time or another, have sat under the bush with the pouting prophet, so consumed by our own annoyance, resentment, disappointment and envy at someone else's good fortune that we forget to acknowledge and give thanks for God's marvelous works of mercy and love in our own lives. Envy is that consuming desire to have everybody else as unhappy as you are, even if your own circumstances aren't so bad. You recall that when God called the reluctant Jonah to go to Nineveh (which is located in modern day Iraq) and to tell them to shape up and get into right relationship, Jonah was in no mood for that. After all, the Ninevites were foreigners and not really on Jonah's radar, as it were. Nothing would have pleased Jonah more than to see them get what he thought they had coming to them. It was as a result of a desperate attempt to get himself out of this assignment that, as he was heading across the Mediterranean in the *opposite* direction of Nineveh, he was swallowed by the big fish (or whale, depending on which translation you use). But the fish couldn't stomach Jonah for long, probably because Jonah was so disagreeable. In the end, Jonah went ahead back toward Nineveh, and, with a little more prodding from God, did what he had been called to do. He didn't like it, however, and when the Ninevites actually listened to him and promised to shape up, thus averting their destruction, Jonah sat down outside the city trying to shade himself from the hot sun, but continued to smolder on the inside. As Frederick Buechner points out, here was an opening God couldn't resist. After providing Jonah a shady plant to sit under, God then causes the plant to shrivel up to the last leaf, as the story goes. When Jonah gets upset at being back in the blistering sun again, God pretends to misunderstand what is bothering Jonah, and resorts to a wry sense of humor that Jonah almost certainly didn't

fail to appreciate. God says, in essence, “Now here you are, Jonah, all upset out of pity for one small plant that has shriveled up. So then, what’s wrong with my having pity for this whole city of Nineveh that was headed for destruction if something wasn’t done about it?”<sup>i</sup>

Now our final story, the one about the landowner and the laborers from Matthew’s gospel, is placed in context between two little vignettes. The one just prior to the parable involves Peter asking Jesus what he and the other disciples will receive as just rewards for their loyalty. Jesus promises them twelve thrones in the world to come, but he also states, “But many who are first will be last; and the last will be first.” And just after this parable of the landowner and laborers, the mother of James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples, asks Jesus to give her sons the best places in his Kingdom—to sit on his right and on his left. Jesus replies that the sons and their mother do not know what they are asking.

Along with the fact that this parable is found between these accounts of disciples jockeying for position, an additional context for this parable was Jesus’s addressing his well-scrubbed “respectable” opponents—scribes and Pharisees—who complained that he gave too much attention to, and spent too much time with, immoral or ritually unclean pariahs: foreigners, tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick—something that a “real” prophet would know better than to do (e.g., Luke 7:39).

And finally, to the gospel writer Matthew’s own community, this parable would have served as a reminder to the Jewish Christian members that the Gentile, non-Jewish “Johnny-come-latelys”—who didn’t live kosher and who were not circumcised—nevertheless, had full standing alongside them in the “New Israel” of Christ’s Kingdom community, the Church. So Jesus tells a story whose ending is “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

As Barbara Brown Taylor points out<sup>ii</sup>, in a number of ways this parable turns many of our common notions of fairness upside down; not only paying the workers hired at the last hour as much as those who worked the full day, but paying the last-hired first. After all, equal pay for equal work is fair; but equal pay for unequal work is not fair. And even less fair is unequal pay for equal work, which describes the world as it is in our global economy. And rewarding those who do the most work is fair; yet rewarding those who do the least work is not fair. Treating everyone the same is fair, but treating everyone the same when they aren’t the same is not fair. That’s what most of us believe. (No matter that Christians proclaim justification by grace [or by faith], most of us hold onto the belief that we get what we deserve, what we’ve worked for. Why else do we work so hard to prove ourselves most of the time?)

In so many respects life is not fair, of course—and we’re reminded of that on a large scale, in the faces of those caught up in war or flooding or financial crises or the realities of chronic and extreme poverty far away and nearby. Life is not fair—all the more reason why God should be. God should be the one authority who is totally fair, rewarding people according to their efforts, the one who keeps track of how hard we’ve worked. Life may not be fair, but God should be. That’s what most of us believe. But if God is likened to the

landowner in this parable, then we don't find a God who plays fair—at least according to *our* standards of just reward. As well, our reading of this parable depends entirely on where we see ourselves in line—for when we're the ones at the front of the line who receive more than we deserve, we call it grace or mercy. It's only when we find ourselves at the end of the line, receiving exactly what we deserve, that we call it injustice or unfair.

God has planted in our hearts a bias against injustice, but it amazes me how often that bias itself becomes biased, such as when I resent someone else's having enough, or some abundance, because I perceive that they have unjustly gained it, or worked less for it, or come later, or somehow haven't fulfilled my expectations. Yet that sensitivity to injustice is amazingly tolerant when I'm the privileged beneficiary of that injustice somehow. Thank God that the Lord in His mercy forgives not only my greed and envy, but also my resentment and blindness. In God's economy, there's even enough forgiveness.

But note that everyone hired for the full day in this parable was promised the prevailing and fair daily wage—that is, what it would take to provide one day's food for the family. At the end of the day they were paid their full promised wage—what was fairly and squarely agreed upon. To all the other workers hired as the day went on, the landowner promised to pay them “whatever is right.” Here were workers who wanted to work the full day and who had waited in various locations to be hired; and who, if not paid a day's wages, would have been hard pressed to have any food on the table that day for their families. We've seen such day labor lines, not just in faraway places, but right here in this city—people who want to work, who have to work, but for one reason or another cannot connect to full and adequate employment; or maybe find work, but for an inadequate minimum, or an even more miserable wage, which these days cannot sustain them or their families. And so the landowner in this parable pays them “whatever is right”—lo and behold, a wage, a living wage that allows them and their families to live another day. The landowner did not mistreat the first-hired. Instead he was simply being generous to the last-hired. Now to do today what that landowner did would get you branded as an eccentric and a foolish business-person, or as unfair or a bleeding-heart liberal or “do-gooder.”

All this said, then, by portraying God as one who is not a good bookkeeper, nor an efficient businessman nor one who abides by fair labor practices, Jesus challenges our sense of entitlement and whatever form of merit or status we base it on. He invites us to transform our irritation and envy at others' good fortune into joy and gratitude by admiring God's merciful generosity—which doesn't preclude fairness but goes beyond it. As I stated last week, God is a God of mercy as well as justice. God calls us to justice, make no mistake about that—but God calls us also to mercy. We humans struggle endlessly with how, when and whether to extend justice, or mercy, as if they were mutually exclusive. But God, it seems, loves justice and mercy equally. As Frederick Buechner reminds us, justice is itself not unmerciful, nor does justice or fairness preclude mercy. In fact, it makes mercy possible.<sup>iii</sup> And so the closer we look at this gospel parable, we see that the justice (or fairness) and the mercy of the landowner are ultimately one and the same. Ultimately, his justice is not unmerciful, nor is his mercy unjust. And so it is with God, for God is more

interested in making us who we are in God's image, and giving us what we need, than in giving us what we think we or others ought to have.<sup>iv</sup>

So, God, it seems, is not fair, because God is more than fair. And when we begrudge the mercy of God, demonstrated in countless ways to people in need, it's usually because we forget that we ourselves are Johnny-come-latelys in Christ's Kingdom, rather than those who have done the most and deserve the most. God, in the end, doesn't give us what we deserve, but vastly more. And the call to come and labor in God's vineyard never ends. Every morning and throughout the day a new call goes out. And every evening, all God wants us to do is to step up and receive the wage that cannot be earned—the love of God; and no grousing! In the Kingdom of God—in God's economy—no one goes to bed hungry. It's only fair.

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<sup>i</sup> See Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 74-75.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), pp. 73-80. See also Barbara Brown Taylor, Bread of Angels (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1997), pp. 131-135.

<sup>iii</sup> See also Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 68-69.

<sup>iv</sup> Some hoard and stockpile. Many more measure out—or are measured out—in a day's pay, strictly according to hours worked. But God's economy is not like ours, thank God. God simply desires that there is enough for everyone in the human household. Household—the Greek is "oikos," from which we derive the word "economy"—"oikonomy," if you will. God desires and provides that abundance, that sense of enough: enough manna in the wilderness, but no more; enough bread for the multitudes, and a lot left over; a day's wages, and no less. In God's economy, there is enough even for ourselves, if we but share. Put another way, there never seems to be enough, even for ourselves, until we start sharing. In our world, which is actually God's world, there is enough, but not if we take more than our share. What do we have that is more than our share? That's a spiritual question for each and all of us to grapple with.