

Pentecost 15, September 21, 2014 (Mt 20:1-16; Jonah, summary; Ps 145:1-8)

Today's gospel tells about laborers in the vineyard who all got paid the same, even though some of them worked only one-twelfth as long and hard as some of the others. In the end, each of them received one denarius, the minimum amount that allowed a small family to live for one day.

This parable tells a deep and basic truth that's hard for us to stomach. The rules by which the kingdom of heaven operates are very different from the rules of our western world. Are you offended that those last-hour slackers received the same payment as the men who worked in the heat of a twelve-hour day? It's not fair!

But that's how the kingdom of heaven works. God's abundant grace, mercy, and forgiveness are offered freely to early-birds and latecomers, insiders and outsiders, workers and idlers, rich and poor, faithful and unfaithful. Thank God we don't get what we *deserve*. We get infinitely more: God's forgiveness, God's mercy, God's kindness.

The challenge of this parable, like many others Jesus told, is to look *outside the box* of our worldly experience and orientation. Look for God! Look for what God is doing! Give up on the idea that we can in some way *earn* or *deserve* God's love and grace.

If we look for God in the actions of the landowner, we may be reminded of the parable of the lost sheep: the shepherd left 99 sheep that were safe and searched for the one that was lost until he found it. Today we have a landowner who repeatedly returns to the marketplace until all the unemployed have been hired.

"The Kingdom of God is like a landowner," said Jesus. God isn't worried here about worthiness or piety or the hard work of the laborers. His sole—and soul!!—concern is caring for the outsiders who can't even find work, let alone God's kingdom!

Nadia Bolz-Weber is an unorthodox ELCA pastor, leading worship at House for all Sinners and Saints in Denver. She's a recovering alcoholic and addict who really *understands* what God's grace is all about. Listen to her take on this parable:

*“The trampy landowner couldn’t manage to keep out of the marketplace. He goes back and back and back, interrupting lives. . . coming to get his people. Grace tapping us on the shoulder. . . . The Kingdom of God is like that exact moment in which sinners/saints are reconciled to God and to one another. The Kingdom of God is like that very moment when God was making all things new. In the end, the value of these laborers in the Kingdom of God comes from their having been come-and-gotten by God. It is the pure and unfathomable mercy of God that defines them and that says, “Pay attention, this mercy is for you” (Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix*, p. 58).*

And like the parable of the Prodigal Son, this parable is addressed not to sinners to urge them to repentance, but to good people to urge them to join with God in joyous generosity (*Disciplines*, 2020, p. 311). What would make Jesus deliriously happy here? If the laborers who’d worked twelve hours broke into spontaneous applause, celebrating the generosity and mercy of the landowner.

Let’s look at Jonah from the same perspective. Jonah was a prophet who lived 800 years before Jesus, and he was 100% focused on the idea of *deserving God’s forgiveness*. If you didn’t earn it, you shouldn’t receive it. So you can understand why Jonah was angry with God.

It took only one day of preaching, and the Ninevites repented. Jonah proclaimed their sinfulness, and they were cut to the soul with grief and sorrow. The king ordered nationwide fasting and repentance, and God forgave the whole lot of them—people and animals! And all they did was *repent!* And who even knew if their repentance was real??

And Jonah sulked. Never in all of holy history has anyone sulked like that! He was so miserable about God’s compassion and mercy, he declared—*twice!*—that he’d rather be dead than continue to live.

God, how could you possibly forgive those Ninevites? YOU know how sinful they’ve been! YOU’VE seen the wickedness and evil they committed. HOW could you betray my trust in your justice and righteousness? They deserve to DIE! How could you FORGIVE them and let them live???

If Jonah had been around for the parable of the landowner, he would have told God how to judge! The day-long workers in the gospel had *earned* the right to a higher wage than those idlers hired at the last hour. The master either should have paid them more or should have paid the last ones hired less. That's only fair.

But *fairness, justice* as the world sees it, is not how the kingdom of heaven works. In fact, *works* isn't even a good word when talking of the kingdom of heaven. We Lutherans have been taught from little on that "good works" won't get you into heaven. We are saved only by God's grace, apart from works.

Someone posted a picture on Facebook this week. It shows an earnest young man seated on a park bench speaking to Jesus. He says, "So why do you allow things like hate, famine, war, suffering, disease, crime, homelessness, and despair to exist in our world?" Looking at him intently, Jesus responds, "Interesting that you should ask that, because I was about to ask you the exact same question."

More than three-quarters of Americans today identify as Christian—and yet in many ways, this one nation under God is Nineveh. But *we*, the Church, are the body of Christ, his hands, feet, voice, and heart in the world.

A Pharisee asked Jesus, "Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?" Jesus answered, **You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself** (Matt. 22:35-40).

And who is our neighbor? According to Jesus, our neighbors are the poor, the lost, the lonely; people of different color, creed, gender, sexual orientation. Our neighbors are the refugees trying to cross the border, the homeless, the differently-abled, the addicts, the oppressed, those discriminated against or persecuted for any reason.

How can we, St. John/St. Stephen, best love our neighbors? *All* of them? We can be like the landowner, giving generously to those in need. Like Jesus on the park bench, helping us identify the tasks he's set for us. Like Jesus on the cross, who loves us so much he died for us.