

Sermon for Proper 20 (Year A) – September 24, 2023
Preached at Saint Aiden’s Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
Jonah 3:10—4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus loved to tell stories: stories that zero in on the human condition. We refer to these stories “parables” because they make us think about ourselves and about God—often in new and surprising ways. Stories that show us what we’re really like. Stories that reveal to us what God is really like. Stories like the one we just heard in Matthew’s Gospel this morning that illustrate God’s generosity.

The owner of a vineyard goes out to hire what in our time would be migrant farm workers to harvest his grapes. Some he hires early in the morning, some at mid-morning, and some even later in the day. And when the end of the day comes—surprise! The owner pays everyone the same wage regardless of how long they’ve worked.

First of all he reverses the order, telling his manager to begin with the last and then going on to the first. Those who were hired late in the day must have been overjoyed to receive a full day’s wage. But when the manager comes to the ones hired early in the morning and they receive the same wage, they are upset, as we might expect. To them, the generosity of the owner seems unfair, just as it may seem to us.

Of course, Jesus is not providing a blueprint here for running a business; rather he is telling us something about our relationship with God. God is generous—to a fault! God’s grace, God’s love for us, does not depend on our ability to earn it. God acts toward us not on the basis of what we do, or how hard we work, or what we can give in return. Rather, God acts toward us on the basis of what we need. In the story, the needs of the workers are all the same. The amount they were paid was just enough to provide a day’s living.

As in many of Jesus’ stories, at the end of this parable there is an element of surprise. In this story, the character who represents God does not act as we might expect God to act. This is just another way of saying that God doesn’t act like we do. (And thank God for that!) No, in God’s kingdom, the last are first and the first are last. In other words, God has no favorites—we are all equal in God’s eyes.

This morning’s lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures is about Jonah. Most of us remember Jonah because he wound up in the belly of a whale, or a “large fish” if you really want to be accurate. But Jonah ended up there because he tried to run away from God. God had given him the task of preaching repentance to the wicked people in the mythical city of Nineveh. But God gives Jonah a second chance to fulfill his mission.

And lo and behold, after entering the city and proclaiming Nineveh’s impending doom, the people instantly turn to God and repent. And God, being a generous God, forgives them. But Jonah is furious, because to his way of thinking it just isn’t fair. He wants to see those

wicked people punished, and so he ends up angry and sulking under a tree. He actually begrudges God's generosity! "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

But God doesn't see people the way Jonah seems them; nor does God see people the way the early workers in the gospel story do; nor does God see people as we see them. When God looks at people—when God looks at us—be careful! Because God doesn't see with our eyes. God isn't blinded by our limited perspective.

When God looks at the suburban homemaker, the corporate executive, the high-school student, the young professional, the retired widow or widower, or the child in preschool, what does God see? God sees the same thing as when God looks at the destitute young mother, or the derelict wino, or the homeless bag lady. God sees a precious human life made in the very image of God, desperately needing the generosity of God's forgiveness, God's grace and love.

Now that kind of equality may not seem fair to us. It may even anger us as it did Jonah. But God is not fair; God is *generous*. And further, God loves us enough to give us a choice—we can either reject God's generosity, or we can accept it. God calls us to live our lives relying totally on God's grace and love. God invites us to be partakers in God's kingdom *now*, calling us to pattern our lives on the generosity and forgiveness made known to us in Jesus, God's Son.

Occasionally, we all catch a fleeting glimpse of the in-breaking reign of God, though more often than not we ignore it as a passing distraction. But every once in a while we stop thinking about what is "fair" and just respond generously to the need at hand. Occasionally, in those brief moments when we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we are *all* "latecomers." We are *all* beneficiaries of God's generosity.

The great fourth century bishop, Saint John Chrysostom, saw this vision of God's reign and spoke of a time when "the first and the last receive their reward. The rich and the poor rejoice together. Abstinent and heedless honor the day. Those who have fasted and those who have not fasted, rejoice. Let no one bewail his poverty, for the riches of all have appeared. Let none sorrow for sins, for forgiveness shines forth from the grave. . . . Christ is risen and life lives!"

But there is something more. In his letter to the Philippians Paul admonishes his readers to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." What does that mean? Perhaps Paul is suggesting that you live your life so that it is a "parable" of the Kingdom of God. Will you dare to risk living a Christ-like life: a life that makes us think about ourselves and about God? A life that shows the world what it means to be a Christian? A life that reveals to us us what God is really like? Will you dare to risk living a life that is a reflection of the generous love of God?