

Mercy

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Jonah 3:10-4:11

Matthew 20:1-16

We spent a full day yesterday, many of us, reflecting on the journey we share together as a church community. We remembered the past, as far as we could; we reflected on two congregations joining together to be one. We sang and talked and discussed questions about our future. We decided to start an afterschool program. Today following worship, our reflection and journey continue, as we learn more about the neighborhoods of Schenectady and share about what the calling of God may be for us.

Speaking of callings from God, since I was a little boy I have loved the story of Jonah, a tale full of satire and harsh humor. Jonah was the world's most reluctant prophet. You remember Jonah's residence in the big fish. Remember why he got into that unlikely residence in the first place? Jonah was running as fast as he could in the opposite direction, when God told him to go preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh, in what is now Iraq, archenemies of Jonah's people. Jonah knew that God was a God of mercy—and if the people of Nineveh would turn toward God, they were going to be forgiven. Jonah really really really did not want that kind of mercy for the people he hated and feared. Not for the Enemy. Not for Nineveh. All he wanted for them was wrath and condemnation.

It is easy to laugh at Jonah. But forgiveness isn't easy. Not after real pain and suffering. If nothing else comes clear out of the Jonah reading, then let this one word rise. Mercy. We follow a God not of raw retribution but mercy. God's justice always has room for the turn-around, the transformation, the opening of the heart. Even from the most terrible people.

In the reading from Matthew's gospel, we listen in on Jesus telling another rather different story. But it is also a story about Mercy. We meet a rich farmer hiring day-laborers: a sight that was as common in Jesus' day as it is today in the villages and cities of North Carolina and upstate New York. The farm owner, instead of, first, paying the ones who came early in the day and worked hard all day, pays them last. And he pays them the same day's wages as the ones he hired at the last minute. Matthew's gospel draws a logical conclusion from this story: God, rather than dealing with us through some narrow understanding of justice, offers mercy to the latecomer. The reign of God, the commonwealth of God, is like that—for God is generous and gives us what we need, not what we deserve.

The lesson we have drawn from this parable through two thousand years of Christianity is one of the most important learnings we can imagine. If God is this way, we too, we should follow. So from early days, at least at our best we have taught: the church does not belong to one group more than another, not to the traditional leaders over the newcomers. And beyond church, we believe that the right to survive, to eat, and to have a living, does not belong more to those who got there first, over those who arrived late. It doesn't belong more to the landowners than to

the workers, or to the CEO more than the assembly line worker, or to the citizen more than the immigrant. That has been the church's teaching from the start.

This parable has been the basis for the radical Christian understanding of the equality of all people. Our faith understanding of equality is based not on equal deservingness, or equal righteousness, but on the conviction that God is merciful and loving as well as just. And so we need to be the same with each other, understanding that we are all co-workers in God's vineyard, all children of the same loving mother/father God.

So let's soak in these realities for a minute. You and I gather in the house of a God of mercy, a God who gives us abundantly in this life, and wants us to do likewise with each other. We trust a God of forgiveness, a God of second and third and seventh and seventy-seventh chances! This isn't how most of the world sees God, or deals with justice and judgment. It surely isn't how humans usually do business. But it is how we who dare the name Christian are called to do things.

But now, my friends, it turns out we need to take a second look at this lovely little parable of Jesus. For behind Matthew's parable, a few biblical scholars detect an earlier Galilean story, one not quite so sweet and easy to apply. It is the story as we think Jesus may have told it the first time around, not to townsfolk who have never worked a field, but to a crowd of farmers and migrant workers and day laborers: poor folk. And it goes a little like this. Open your minds and prepare your hearts for a very different parable.

Once upon a time, it was harvest time, a wealthy farmer with a bumper crop of grapes in his vineyard needed workers to bring in the harvest. So as was the usual practice, he went down to the market to pick up day laborers. He hired a bunch, saying he would pay them the usual—a denarius—let's say twenty bucks, not a whole lot of money—for their day's work. In the middle of the day he needed more workers, so he went back to the market to hire more, saying he would pay them fairly. And then toward the end of the day seeing he needed more help still, he went back and found some more, and said to them rather sarcastically, "Why are you all idling here? Get to work." He took them out to the vineyard too.

When the long day came to an end he had his manager pay them. They paid the last ones first, the same he promised the first workers. Then the ones in the middle of the day. And finally, to their chagrin, the regular workers got the same measly denarius as the others. Now a denarius isn't much—especially when there probably won't be work the next day. It might feed one person a couple days. In those days, most of these day workers didn't make enough to keep their bellies full themselves, let alone support a family. These landless workers died young. So the early workers were pretty cranky. They felt slighted, and rightfully so. They had been in the hot sun all day. The manager singled out one of them, and said, "Hey, "Friend," are you challenging my generosity? Take what's yours and get out of here." The rest of the workers fell silent. Their companion had been blackballed. There would be no work for him around there anymore.

When I first heard Bill Herzog*, a renowned American Baptist biblical scholar, tell the story this way, peeling away the Matthew parable to get back to the earlier Palestinian version, I confess it made my stomach turn. Why would Jesus tell THIS story? But in the years since, this

old story has been troubling the waters of my theology. I have learned more about day-laborers, in this country and elsewhere. And I have learned that what looks like generosity to the employer is often way less than a living wage. I have learned that employers in every kind of workplace sometimes do things like this, divide and conquer, to turn workers against each other. I have been with a handful of different migrant workers in the US – it was first in 1986, when two Latino workers came to our church in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, came to church because they were Baptist. One of them had no coat. It was cold in Pittsfield, so I gave him one of my coats.

I have made friends since then with former undocumented farm workers from Burma (who had worked fields in Thailand); I have talked once with landless former farmers who have taken back plantation land in Brazil, and very recently with a former day-laborer in northeast Brazil. I have spent time with an Indian seminarian who grew up poor and then organized with women farm-workers in south India, who were being harassed by their absentee landlord—whom they often wished would be more absent.

I listened. For twenty years since I first heard the parable retold this way I have listened. And through these conversations, I can tell you that day-laborers rarely have an experience of Godlike grace from a landowner. They rarely get to see the owner!

Just this week I talked with a man in this congregation who when he was younger spent some time picking apples to support himself. Eric, I am going to share our very brief conversation on apple picking. “I worked for two different farmers,” he told me. “I did make more money working for one than the other.” I looked Eric in the eye and said “Did either of those farmers represent to you the generosity and mercy of God?” Eric, I don’t remember exactly what you said. But I remember you started to laugh. I believe your response was, “No way: neither of them represented God to me.”

Now why would Jesus tell this story? Bill Herzog, my New Testament scholar friend, says it was to unmask the fundamental injustice of this kind of relationship between workers and their employers. Many people had lost their land back then, and they were dying gradually working for the very people who had gotten it. Bill suggests Jesus was essentially a revolutionary teacher, an organizer helping the people see the injustice of their situation. But what’s the good news there? I guess that depends where you stand!

Maybe Jesus was also talking to farmers, and calling them to repentance—not just inner spiritual repentance, where it all starts, but a fundamental review of how they treated the people who worked for them. Maybe Jesus was a bit like Jonah, only this prophet sent to call the privileged and the poor to a new set of relationships, to start a whole new experiment in human relationships!

However we read the parable, whether we read it in the Matthew way, or we read the edgier version that Herzog and others think Jesus put out there in the first place, there is this in it. In a world where millions barely know how they will get by, and a few control almost everything, God sees the situation of the poor. God sees the situation of the invisible worker, be they poor or middle class or even affluent, who suffers at the whim of an arbitrary employer. God sees and God is in solidarity with the invisible woman who waits all day for work, and then

goes home at the end of it, with no money to buy supper for her children. God sees. And God calls all of us—all of us-- to enter into the struggle for at least a minimal level of fairness for all. Not pennies handed out, but a merciful form of justice, based on real human need, real human suffering, real human community.

Who is my neighbor? Who is our neighbor? One comment from yesterday's retreat rings out to me. One of our youth said, "We need to *get to know* our neighbors—who they really are, find out about their families." We need to follow God's lead in this, because GOD SEES. God is already well acquainted with each person who lives and works around us. God sees. And God wants what is right and generous and fair for each of them, and each of us.

I've shared three stories with you today, three parables of a God who is merciful and loving and generous and just. The fourth story is still being told. Jesus Christ is creating a new story today, a new parable about the Mercy of God, right here in this place. What are the roles we will play in the story? What parts do you and I get?

*Herzog II, William R. (1994) *Parables as Subversive Speech*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.