

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 20A  
Jonah 3:10-4:11  
Philippians 1:21-30  
Matthew 20:1-16

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A friend of mine has grapevines at home, and right now he has more grapes than he knows what to do with. Too many grapes to eat fresh. They usually make raisins, but there are too many grapes to process into raisins. More grapes than they can even freeze, so they are currently giving grapes away like crazy. (I wish he lived in Portland – I'd invite him here to share the wealth!) But the point is, my friend's enormous harvest has resulted in **lavish generosity**.

I wonder if the vineyard owner in Jesus' parable was in a similar situation. For whatever reason, **lavish generosity** became his way of operating.

The vineyard owner was **generous** in hiring lots and lots of workers. He went back time and again to the day labor center, which was essentially the town square, so that by 5 pm he had pretty much hired everyone who wanted to work that day. Did he *need* that many workers? The parable doesn't say. Maybe he had a bumper crop to bring in -- or maybe he just wanted to see as many people employed as possible. Hmmm.

The vineyard owner was also shockingly **generous** in his pay policies. Laborers who worked just one hour were given a full day's wage—the same as those who worked twelve hours. If you read the story carefully, you realize the owner did not shortchange anyone. He gave each worker exactly what he had promised – he just surprised some by paying more. Which *seemed* unfair to the ones who worked all those hours in the hot sun. But in the end, everyone got paid the usual daily wage – they got what they needed to support themselves and their family for that day. They received enough to live on. Which could be the point of the exercise. Hmmm.

Jesus' parables are never just interesting stories. Parables are meant to provoke us, turn our values on their heads, and get us imagining a new way of being that is different from the way the world works now, and more in line with God's dreams and intentions for us. This is one of many "parables of the kingdom" Jesus told, picturing the reign of God, pointing us toward God's alternate reality.

Usually a parable makes one or two main points. Today I find two:

Number 1: In God's reign, as many people are included as possible.

Number 2: In God's reign, everyone has what they need.

First things first. **In God's reign, as many people are included as possible.** This does look like what that vineyard owner was up to, hiring so many people. For some reason, that owner wanted his field *full of workers*. So every person who waited and hoped for a job— got one.

Every person had the chance to get their hands dirty and participate. Every person had the opportunity to contribute their abilities. That is satisfying. It is dignifying.

Now, it could be there were some workers waiting in that town square who were not usually the first ones picked. (You know, like in gym class, how some people always get picked first for the teams? And how hard it is for the ones who are always left behind?) Maybe some workers in that town square weren't very strong. Maybe they had physical or emotional problems. Still, they wanted to work. They wanted to earn. They didn't get chosen at 6 AM, or 9 AM, or noon, but by the end of the day, there was nobody left behind. Everyone was busy in the vineyard. Everyone had a way to contribute.

When human beings are in charge, there will always be some people left behind. But the reign of God doesn't leave anyone behind. Jesus taught this consistently.

Remember how Jesus told the story of a wedding banquet – when the feast was ready, the invited guests wouldn't come. So the host went out to the streets to invite people in. The point was, those tables needed to be filled. The point was to **include as many people as possible**.

There was another time when people were bringing children to Jesus to be blessed. The disciples sent the kids away – because back then children didn't matter until they grew up – but Jesus called them back. He said: *My reign is made up of people like these children!* (Mt 19:13-15) Especially the “little ones” who aren't valued by others are welcomed, because **in God's reign, as many people are included as possible**.

This is beautiful news, because it means every one of us has a place in God's new creation. Every one of us has a welcome. It doesn't matter if a person has followed Jesus their whole life or if they make a deathbed confession of faith. Come early or come late, all people belong because of God's unconditional, infinite love. And every one of us has some way to contribute to bringing the harvest of compassion and hope and justice that God is growing on earth, among us, right now. That is a deep, rich blessing.

And there is even more blessing when we decide to act out God's values in our own manner of life, and seek to **include as many people as possible**. A city is healthier when all voices are heard. A nation is healthier when all its citizens vote. A classroom is healthier when each child has a job to do that's suited to their abilities. A church is healthier when it's inclusive, when people of all ages and races and genders and nationalities and income levels are welcome. A family system is healthier when each member has a way to contribute, a way to share their gifts. The blessings go on as we learn from Jesus.

And the rubber really hits the road when we examine the second core value in this parable: **In God's reign, everyone has what they need.**

In the vineyard parable, every person gets what they need to feed their family and themselves. No matter how long they work. **Everyone has what they need.**

For capitalists like us, this is truly provocative. I wonder where it provokes you most.

Does the pay system seem unfair? Some people worked longer, does it seem like they deserve more money? Or does this whole setup just seem completely impractical? No business owner could keep this up, they'd go bankrupt. Or does it sound, you know, Marxist? We all know how that worked out, ideals corrupted by human greed.

But this is a parable. It makes a simple point: **In God's reign, everyone has what they need.** It doesn't tell us how to get there, just challenges us to keep the focus on **people and what people need to live.**

A pastor friend suggests we look very closely at what the word **deserve** is all about. Which people we see as more deserving than others. What we expect people to do to prove they are deserving. Are people born into wealth more deserving than those born into poverty? Which families deserve to be fed?

All of this boggles our minds because we Americans are spiritually entwined with money. We look to money for our security. Money is our cultural god. Money has such a tight hold on us, we can't bear to entertain new ideas about it.

But Jesus means to explode our assumptions. The vineyard in this parable isn't capitalist, it isn't socialist or Marxist, it is simply **a place that values people first.** This vineyard owner doesn't care about making a profit (shocking as that is!) This owner cares about creating community and valuing people, and getting people what they need to live. Like my friend who has more grapes than his family knows what to do with, this owner operates from a mindset of abundance, not scarcity. He's not concerned about running short. He believes there is enough to go around, so **everyone can have what they need.**

What would it mean for us to shift our focus in this direction? To operate more out of God's abundance, and less out of scarcity? To shift our awareness toward gratitude for the infinite gifts we are given and can share. God wants to free us from fear and envy and judgment, and let God infinite compassion be our guide.

Generosity is certainly at the core of the life God wants for us. A life that is generous instead of stingy. Open-handed rather than small minded. A lifestyle that's oriented to the good of all people, not just what's good for the self. God wants this for us and for the whole human family.

Just imagine learning to live a new way, in the freedom of God's inclusive and generous love. Amen.