

16 Pentecost, Proper 20, Yr. A
September 20, 2020
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20: 1-16

Probably the universal response to the Gospel we just heard is, “That’s not fair!” It might even be the response of those who think of themselves as being at “the back of the line” who think they have got something for nothing. It certainly goes against the wisdom of the world, to say nothing of the Protestant work ethic. But Jesus is drawing a distinction between how things work in the world and how they work in the Kingdom. In the world, it’s most often what we earn; in the Kingdom it’s all about grace, which is unearned, freely given.

When my sister and I were growing up, we shared a bedroom and a portable phonograph. She had a record set that told the story of the Grasshopper and the Ants. You may have heard it – it’s about a grasshopper who plays away the summer and fall, completely disregarding the busy scurrying of the ants as they prepared for winter and who, when winter arrives, is woefully unprepared and turns up at the ants’ door, hungry and freezing, with the appropriate abject apologies and who listens respectfully to the moral chiding of the ants as they do their duty by him – probably grudgingly.

It’s the way of the world, right? That competition is a fact of life, that everything is scarce and measured and doled out. That we need to be careful not to be taken advantage

of by those less intelligent or less industrious than we. We need to be front-of-the-line people.

I remember a friend in seminary who was exactly that. And she was organized and industrious. She told me once that work situations were always difficult for her because she was always more efficient and faster than most of her co-workers. She could work circles around them, she said. She should, she always thought, either have been paid more or allowed to work shorter hours. A front-of-the-line kind of girl.

And Jonah was a front-of-the-line kind of guy. He had no interest at all in those Ninevites who by any measure were at the back of the line and deserved to stay there. In fact, he suspected from the beginning that God might very well relent and not punish them and he, Jonah, thought it was only fair that they should get their just deserts. None of this namby-pamby merciful God stuff for him. Jonah betrayed a certain ungenerosity of spirit in the whole story and remained unmoved even though he had received more than his share of God's mercy: God forgave him when he ran the other way, rescued him from the sea and then from the whale, gave the example of the bush, explained why God relented – none of it was any good for Jonah who, at the end of the book, which we read this morning, remained stubbornly entrenched in his resentment. Jonah reminds me of the elder son in the story of prodigal son – the one who isn't all that happy to see his younger brother return and who says to the father,

“Look. I’ve been here working, slaving, I’ve been virtuous and disciplined and you never gave ME anything. It’s not FAIR!” And we aren’t told at the end of either story what happened to Jonah or whether the elder son ever repented and joined the party or whether he stayed in the barn kicking things and pouting.

Both Jonah and the elder son are like the laborers who started first thing in the morning. All of them are hard workers and all of them are righteous in the good sense of the word. The problem is, though, that they think it’s all about what you can achieve on your own. And, when you’ve been able to achieve things on your own, when you have been successful in the eyes of the world, it’s much harder to recognize that you yourself may be in need of grace or forgiveness or assistance. If you have been successful in the eyes of the world, it’s easy to be seduced into thinking, like Pelagius, the contemporary of Augustine, who taught that we really can do it on our own, that your success is well-deserved. It’s easy to think of yourself as a self-made man or woman.

You may remember a couple of years ago that a group of churches went together and sponsored a talk by Chuck Collins. He talked about the myth of the self-made man – that many things go into worldly success: luck, the accident of birth, stable families, parents who encouraged you, and who had high expectations, education, connections. Another person who owned computer companies talked about all the things he had received

from the larger society that went into his success – those things I just mentioned, but also good public schools, libraries that were open when he needed them, college scholarships, employees who had been likewise educated. So these front-in-the-line people realize that they got there but with a lot of help.

I remember when I was in law school, hearing a professor talk about the struggle law students had with this. They had always been in the top 10% of whatever class they were in, and now they were in a situation where many of them, 90% of them, to be exact, were going to be further down the line. They had a lot riding on being in that top 10% because they “knew” that only “losers” were in that other 90%. But those at the back of the line have one great advantage: they know about grace. Robert Capon, in his book on the parables, says that when the paychecks were passed out, the landowner’s actions “went down like Gatorade for the last bunch hired, like dishwater for the next to the last, like vinegar for the almost first and like sulfuric acid for the first to be hired. It’s not fair, they cry. And when the landowner asks, “Are you upset because I’m being generous?” the answer had to be “absolutely.”

The lesson, of course, is that in God’s kingdom, it’s all about grace. It’s not about bookkeeping. Again, Capon points out, ‘if the world could have been saved by bookkeeping, it would have been saved by Moses, not Jesus. The law would have been just fine. And God gave it a thousand years or so to see if anyone could pass a

test like that. But when nobody did - when it became perfectly clear that there was 'no one who was righteous, not even one,' (Romans 3:10) God gave up on salvation by the books. He cancelled everybody's records in the death of Jesus and rewarded us all, equally and fully, with a new creation in the resurrection of the dead." (*Kingdom, Grace and Judgment*)

Commentators on this passage point out that how you hear it depends on where you see yourself in the line and that most of us identify with those in the front of the line. But what if you were at the back. We often assume, when we read this, that those at the back were lazy ne'er-do-wells, but the text doesn't say that. It just says that nobody had hired them. Maybe they were not chosen earlier because they were shorter or smaller or at the back of the group. When I lived in Texas, I would see groups of men waiting at places like those described in the Gospel. A truck would pull up, some would be chosen and others would be left behind for no apparent reason. Someone has pointed out that all of those men had probably been there for a long time, hoping to be hired and knowing that if they weren't hired, they and their families would go to bed hungry that night. (And maybe that's why the landowner paid them what he did – because he knew that with a lesser amount, they and their families would go to bed hungry.)

Most of us have had some sort of experience of this. Maybe it was at a playground baseball game where the

team captains would choose, one by one, until the least desirable players were left. Were you ever the last one left standing? The one the captain took with a sigh? Or for girls, the one left standing as the last wallflower at the dance – the one with no partner? It would be like that, I think. Judged and found wanting. And longing for grace.

It's interesting, when you think about being in line, that the people in front compare themselves to those behind them. By doing so, they can work up a good case for resentment. But what if the comparison was different. What if we compared ourselves to the persons we were meant to be, the ones who are supposed to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Then, I think, we're glad for grace.

There's a great Snoopy cartoon in which Lucy is telling Charlie Brown that sooner or later he was going to have to learn that "you reap what you sow, and you get out of life exactly what you put into it. No more and no less!" And Snoopy, walking behind them, is thinking, "I'd kind of like to see a little more margin for error!" Perhaps if we could see ourselves as God sees us, we'd be less interested in "getting what we deserve" and more interested in mercy. Happy with a little more margin for error! Amen.

