

Matthew 20:1-16 and Jonah 3:10-4:11

On the surface the stories of Jonah and the workers in the vineyard have little to do with each other; one is about a man who is angry because his mission succeeded, and the other is about vineyard workers who don't believe the landowner is paying fairly. They both are about God's grace. Yet if we delve deeper into these passages, we discover that they both speak about not wanting some people to have more than what we believe they deserve.

First let's look at the parable of the workers in the vineyard. There are many incongruences when it is looked at closely. First, what landowner who has a manager would go by himself to find workers for the vineyard? Wouldn't he have sent the manager of his business to do this work? And not only does he go once in the morning to find the workers, but he goes looking for workers four more times during the day. He bargains with the first few groups of workers as to their pay, but the rest of the workers are told to come to work and he will pay them a fair wage, which turns out to be exactly the same; everyone is paid exactly the wage agreed upon by the first hired. It's in our human nature to cringe at this.

When I was attending my home church our younger adult class would get together at least once a month at a member's home, each month we'd meet at a different place. When Jim and Robin, the couple who lived on a grape farm, hosted the get together it was a picnic in their backyard which adjoined their vineyard. When I say vineyard, I mean acres of grape vines, a family business located in Harborcreek, PA. Jim, knowing I was heading to seminary, took me to the edge of the vineyard and taught me a lot about grapes.

I had picked grapes one time for his uncle, but other than that I knew nothing about them. Jim explained that each grape plant has a trunk and many branches, vines, grow out of it. The vines need to be tied to a support to receive enough light and rain to produce grapes. Each vine must be individually hand tied, and not just once. Can you imagine the amount of work it takes? Backbreaking, labor intensive, requiring manual dexterity. It would take months to get the entire vineyard tied if only a few people worked the vines.

So, when the owner in our parable hired men to work, he must have realized that he hadn't hired enough, so he went out and hired more, and more, and more, and even more. After hand picking his workers the landowner sent his manager out to pay the workers, instructing him to begin with those who had been hired last. The last hired were paid a full day's wage. Each successive group was paid exactly the same, even though they expected to be paid more because those who worked fewer hours were paid what the first group had been promised for a full day. So they complained, and in the world's standard of work they had every right to do so; it would only be fair and equitable. I mean, doesn't that just rankle your sensibilities? Doesn't it seem as though the landowner is setting himself up for this confrontation? But the landowner told them he paid them what they had agreed upon, and he could pay whatever he wished to pay to the rest of the workers.

In the parable we believe that, since this is the kingdom of heaven Jesus is explaining, the landowner is God. Think about it, God is just. No one ever said God is fair to what we consider to be fair, but God is just. Even though the first workers brought in had to work the longest hours, they were paid what they agreed upon and we have to agree that is just, even if we don't feel it's fair.

In today's Old Testament story God provides Jonah a bush to shade him, and when the bush dies Jonah is angry. God uses this example to explain to Jonah that he loved the people of

Nineveh and wanted to save them from their sin. Jonah believed the people of Nineveh should not be given the chance to be saved. If you recall the story, Jonah went so far as to try to sail away in order not to prophesy to the Ninevites. Why? The people of Nineveh were mortal enemies of the Israelites. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, and the Assyrians fiercely attacked the Hebrew nation. To put it in today's perspective it would be like a godly Ukrainian man going into Russia to proclaim that God is going to smite them dead if they didn't turn from the evil they are pursuing, but if they do God will bless them. Do you honestly think anyone would want to carry this message? Two reasons I can think of why a person wouldn't want to do that. First, it would be a good way to get themselves killed and second, why would they want God to bless the people who were attacking their homeland?

Jonah didn't want the people of Nineveh to be saved. He wanted them to receive God's retribution for their evil. He didn't think it was fair for God to save them. God thought otherwise. God wanted his creation to turn to him, and amazingly, the people of Nineveh did just that, which caused Jonah to feel that he, and the Israelites, were being treated unfairly.

Have there been times in your life when you believed a group of people were being treated better than they should be treated? I had a friend who surprised me once by her anger against the people who are on welfare. She had a mentally ill sister with a child who both were on public assistance. There was no way her sister could possibly work, there was no one providing for her niece other than my friend who couldn't afford to support the three of them. I was shocked when she vehemently spoke out against public welfare knowing how desperately her sister needed public assistance. I understand that there are people who abuse the system, but there are also people who, due to mental or physical disabilities, are not able to support themselves. Do we judge all people with the same measuring stick?

What about the union workers who are striking against the auto manufacturers? They are asking for, among other things, a 40% raise to bring them in line with their CEOs' salary. I understand that with their current pay package, over the years they have lost at least 4% of their salary to inflation while the CEOs have been above the inflation impact. But compare this to those who are retired. The Social Security cost-of-living increase has not been in line with inflation and most pension or annuity plans do not increase payments over the years. Is it fair that the auto workers should be asking for such a huge salary increase knowing the cost will be passed on to the consumer? But is it just that the CEOs' earnings are that much above the floor workers? Is it right that both of them are weathering inflation costs better than retirees? Please don't think I'm implying or judging along one line or the other; I'm simply giving you ideas to consider.

Also consider this, who are the people in today's world you consider to be the last hired in the vineyard earning what they don't deserve? Is it company CEOs earning far more than the common laborer? Is it the worker asking to be treated in the way they consider to be fair? Is it people on welfare? Is it the person who was hired for the position you expected to get? Is it the person holding a sign on the street corner? Ask yourself another question: who do I want to lose because they don't deserve what they are receiving but they seem to be fairing better than me? And finally ask yourself: where is God in all of this? Does God love them equally, and does God's grace extend even to them?

Praise God for the grace that has been give to you and me.

All glory be to God.