

THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year A, Lectionary 25

September 18, 2011

Jonah 3:10—4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Pastor David Tryggestad

Concordia Evangelical Lutheran Church

Duluth, Minnesota

“It’s not fair!” It’s not just children and teenagers who appeal to fairness. We all do. We all cry out, “It’s not fair!”

But I want to leave our gospel for a short time in order to revisit one of my favorite stories in the Bible—the story of reluctant Jonah. I think that one of the reasons his story appeals to me is that I see a lot of myself in Jonah, reluctance and my selfish feelings of “It’s not fair!”

Jonah did not want to go preach God’s word to the people of Ninevah. They were his enemies, and he knew that if they heard God’s word and turned to God, God would forgive them. And Jonah did not want God to forgive them; Jonah wanted God to punish them. Jonah wanted to exclude the people of Ninevah from God’s grace and mercy. So Jonah went the opposite direction, setting sail toward Spain. God sent a storm and the sailors threw Jonah overboard. The storm ceased, God sent a great fish to swallow Jonah so that he would not drown, the fish delivered Jonah safely on dry land, and God re-commissioned Jonah to go to Ninevah. He did and the people of Ninevah repented. God forgave them had mercy on them, just as Jonah expected would happen, and he was angry. Jonah felt entitled to God’s grace and mercy and did not consider the Ninevites to be worthy. How often do we have similar thoughts and feelings about others, particularly those we don’t like? Do we hear ourselves say, “It’s not fair!”?

I heard snippets of an interview with Michael Moore, the social commentator and documentary film maker, on the radio this past week. I did not hear the full context of what the conversation was about, but one thing jumped out of the car radio at me as I was driving so that I almost had to stop the car. Michael Moore asserted that the 400 wealthiest people in the United States have more wealth than the bottom 150 million combined.¹ That’s a staggering figure. I thought of that in light of the workers in the vineyard. In our parable, those who worked one hour received the same as those who worked 12 hours; in other words, those who worked one hour received 12 times as much per hour. If we take Michael Moore’s assertion that 400 people in the US have more than 150 million, and we divide 400 into 150 million, we get 375,000. In other words, the average person on the top—one of the 400—is worth 375,000 times more than the average person on the bottom, one of the 150 million. Those 400 at the top would receive 375,000 danarii, while those 150 million at the bottom would get only one.

If those who worked 12 hours in our parable are grumbling, “Not fair!” at the landowner, how much more are those 150 million crying out, “Not fair!” about those 400 at the top?!

It is no wonder that Michael Moore concludes that such inequities cannot be sustained. History shows us over and over again that such economic disparities result in revolutionary social unrest. The same day I heard the Michael Moore interview, the new poverty statistics came out: more Americans are in poverty now than ever before, more than 46 million.

But our parable is not about economics. Rather, it’s about God’s grace and mercy. Those who worked 12 hours in the vineyard feel they deserve more than those who worked only one hour. They figure that they should receive more of God’s grace and mercy. They are more deserving; they are more worthy.

There are at least two problems with that kind of thinking. First of all, it limits God’s grace and mercy, as if there were a finite amount. If there’s only a finite amount of grace and mercy to go around, then those who deserve more should receive more. But God’s grace and mercy are unlimited.

I remember the years when we had only one child. When our son, Erik, was born, I could not imagine having any more love within me than I felt for that little guy. How could there possibly be more? But then, when our daughter came along four years later, I experienced just as much love for her as for Erik, yet there was no less love for Erik. My love somehow multiplied. There was more than enough to go around. Then came our third child, another son. And the same thing happened. More and more love.

That’s how it is with God, and even more so. There is no limit on God’s love for the world. When God offers grace and mercy on another, there is no less grace and mercy for me.

The other problem with the economics model is that there is no deserving God’s grace and mercy. If we deserved it—if we somehow earned it or felt entitled to it—it would not be grace.

Sometimes I wonder if one of the biggest barriers for those who would seek God and who feel excluded from being embraced by the church might be that those on the inside sometimes like to wear the badge of entitlement. We work hard at being good so that we convince ourselves that we are worthy and deserving of God’s grace, and, as a result, we are not so welcoming of those we are not sure about, those who might not be quite as *worthy*, or quite as *deserving*, or quite as *sincere*. I wonder if *sincerity* might not be a pious cover for a badge of entitlement.

Finally, I have a problem with the notion that work in the kingdom is drudgery, that it is anything like bearing the burden of the day, or the scorching heat, as those who worked 12 hours experienced. Yes, Jesus calls us to take up our cross and to follow him. And, yes, there is a cost of discipleship. Yet, there is no place else I would rather be than to

live and work under the grace and mercy of God, and I would hope that I would welcome others into the kingdom, anytime or anyplace. For, as the Apostle Paul says in our Second Lesson, “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me . . .” (Philippians 1:21a).

It is my fervent prayer that we might all hear our Lord call to us, “Come to me and enter into the joy of my vineyard, my kingdom.” I would say the sooner the better!

Meanwhile, where is God? God is out in the marketplace looking for *more* laborers to work in the vineyard!

Thanks be to God!

¹Michael Moore interview on National Public Radio’s “Talk of the Nation,” Wednesday, September 14, 2011. I misstated the figure when I preached, citing 125 million rather than 150 million, and thus the resulting ratio of one to 375,000 is accurate, rather than one to 312,500, as I stated.