

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145

Philippians 1:21-27

Matthew 20:1-16

In the name of the one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.+

One of the striking things we see today in our Gospel reading is this image of the persistence and the generosity of God. In our parable today, we have the landowner – in the original language the “anthropos,” meaning simply the male or female human being. This landowner, who is our parallel with God, went out to gather laborers not just once or twice; not just enough to get the work done, but over and over again, up to the last moment. I doubt this ever happened then, and I doubt it ever happens now, for the hundreds of desperate day-laborers who gather every morning on Elm Street, right here in Stamford – a city the same size as Jonah's Ninevah was then. Day laborers on Elm Street are surely as quick to grumble about who is getting a fair deal as were the laborers from two thousand years ago in the vineyard. Day-laborers of any century probably don't see themselves as being very valuable, or worth the persistence or generosity of a landowner such as the one in our Gospel. But this landowner, this God of ours, is persistent: God doesn't stop until all are gathered in. And this God of ours is generous: there is no stopping until all are made equal.

The other issue that stands out in our readings today has to do with the whole idea of control. Jonah wanted control of the fate of those wicked Ninevites. He wanted so badly for his predictions about them to be proved right that when he was thwarted, and the people of Ninevah actually righted their ways, he wished he could die. *Jonah* wanted to be the one in the judgement seat, just as the early laborers wanted to be the ones to be the judge of what the late arrivals should be paid. We humans, we “anthropoi,” really like to be in control. And in our scripture today, God is calling us on this.

Jesus says, “*I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?*” Jesus is reminding us of that pesky little detail: **that everything belongs to God; everything is under God's domain; all control is ultimately God's.** It is not our place to try to control or judge. I am reminded of the Gospel lessons of the past several Sundays, all of which remind us of how we are to deal with disputes and with our tendency to judge.

You may remember Father Jim+ explaining a few lessons ago that, in dealing with disputes or judgement, we have to first discern whether some troubling thing has directly affected *us* before we consider acting on it. That is a very helpful distinction. Jesus taught us that it's only appropriate to address these sort of issues when they are harming us directly. In our parable today, the early workers were not being harmed when they fairly received the pay they signed up for. It didn't really matter what others were paid that day – it did not impact the early workers directly. It was basically... none of their business, as

we say these days. Think of Jonah, for instance: what the Ninevites did or didn't do was not something that affected him personally. What happened to the Ninevites was basically... none of Jonah's business. There are a whole lot of things that we can get very worked up about, things that we can waste tremendous energy fuming over, that are essentially... none of our business. But we humans have a tendency to want to be in each others' business, to make judgements, to pass sentences. We covet the illusion that we are in control. Jesus is reminding us today that none of this is ours to wrangle over. Control, and timing, and order are God's business.

And this is the Good News in our scripture today! We don't have to be the one judging, manipulating, pushing – we are *not* in control. God is! God is ultimately in control of all things, and this is good news indeed. Like the landowner in our parable today, God is patient, and generous, and persistent. And God is in control of not only the events in our lives: God is in control of the *order* in which things happen as well. Notice in our parable that what disturbs the grumbling workers most is not just that the late arrivals were paid *equally*, but that they were paid *first*. I think God's design in this ordering of payment was for them – and for us – to *witness* the generosity of God to the latecomers – how else would the earlybirds have known what the landowner did, unless he made them wait to see it? Seeing God's ordering of things, this last being first and first being last, is one more way of driving home the point that God is the one in charge.

But lest you think I'm just naively skipping along humming to myself the words of St. Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well," when anyone can see that all manner of tragedy and heartbreak are in truth falling down around our ears, let me be clear. I am not suggesting that all is well here on earth. This assignment of ours, this lifetime of ours, is sometimes almost too hard to bear. The unthinkable happens before our very eyes; the unbearable stares us square in the face. How is it that God is in control of even these things, of even the order of these things?

I think this is when we have to remember the *scope* of God's vision, the *perspective* of God's order. The scope of God's plan is so much broader that we can ever imagine – I'm reminded of Isaiah 55, "*my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*" God's plan reaches far ahead into eternal life: into the eschaton. Listen to the "tag-line" of our scripture today: it says, "*So the last will be first, and the first will be last.*"

In the Greek, we find that the word for first is "protos," and the word for last is "eschatos." The choice of the word, "eschatos," points us ahead to the concept of the eschaton, that domain of last, final, and imperishable things. God's design, God's control, and God's timing all have to do with the eschaton, that eternal life of joy and gladness given to us by the saving grace of Jesus Christ, where there are no more tears, and no more sighing...and definitely no more grumbling over who gets paid one little silver denarius and when. The truth of that famous saying of St. Julian is that everyone tends to leave off the important ending of her famous saying. What she said was, "**All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, in the eschaton.**"

Maybe not so much in this moment, but in the eschaton. In God's time, the order and evidence of God's beneficent control will be abundant. For even Jonah said, (and wasn't he a handful?) Even Jonah said, God is indeed a "*gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*"

But you may be wondering to your self at this point...so is this it? Is this the Good News today – that God has it all covered, but it might not make sense to us until the eschaton? I think this parable invites us to ask the question of how we as Christians benefit from our faith day to day, compared with folks who are latecomers to his Table, or who never have the opportunity to find him at all. If, as Jesus indicates, all laborers are persistently sought out and generously invited in, no matter how late, how is it better for the ones who labor longer?

We as his faithful follower, as the ones who labor all our lives in the vineyard of ministry (and by that I mean all of us, of course) have the great gift of living in the presence of his power and his love. We have the awesome opportunity to feel his love, not to just benefit in the end from it. We as Christians have him with us – Emanuel: God with us, every day. By him, and with him, and in him, we have his real presence, and the longer we have to live in this knowledge, the more blessed we are. We are so blessed; we are the lucky ones; we most certainly get the "better deal," compared with those who only have the chance to feel his presence in this life only briefly, or who labor their whole lives without his partnership and presence, and only meet him in the eschaton.

Let us think about who we might invite to his table – who is missing? Is there someone you know who needs his power and presence in their lives right now? Invite them to come to Jesus' table - it is his, not ours. Everyone is welcome. Let us think on this as we turn to the altar, to celebrate the abundance of God's radical love, and to give thanks for the awesomeness of God's design in the sending of his Son, blessing us with his power and presence through all the days of our lives, and granting us joy and peace with him in the eschaton.

Amen.

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