

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, amazing, unreal, unsuppressed, undeserved grace of God and peace to be you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I am very glad to be with you here today, although you know there is something of a danger to invite a seminar teacher sort into your pulpit. Preachers can be long winded, but teachers can be worse, you know. And, I am both, so you are getting it here. I mean that I have been working on parables which happen to be a particular interest of mine lately. So when I do this in a classroom setting, I have an hour and 15 minutes to do this. I will try to shorten this up somewhat today!

As you will see, for me I can't really teach, with out preaching and I don't think you can preach without a little bit of teaching here either today.

Let's take a look at the parables. I have been working on them and what strikes me about them is the fact that somehow my perception has changed from earlier on. I mean there was even a change I remember growing up in Sunday School and it sort of reflected on the scholarly work of the day that people would look at these parables and they would say, "O.K., what point are we supposed to get from this parable. What lesson are we suppose to learn from it?"

For me, I suppose the lesson I learned from this parable was, hide out until the very end and then you only have to do one hour of work. But if you were trying to get a moral or a lesson out of this story, I suppose it is something out first and last and God being interested in all people, or something like that. The kind of thing is where you went through the other parables and people said, well this one means small beginnings, great endings, or the Good Samaritan, about the importance of love for neighbors. All the kinds of little proverbial, moralistic sort of things that would make nice little cross stitch patterns, and all that led one fellow to say, "Well, if that is the only thing that Jesus had to talk about were these nice little moralistic things, the only reason to crucify him would be to end the boredom and tedium of it all.

What was it that caused Jesus to do parables instead of just simply giving straight forward little teaching, and what was it about these parables that perhaps even caused him to end up being crucified. So as I approach these parables I have a definition I have developed with using other things that I use in my classroom. I talk about parables functioning as metaphors that they are trying to set two things along side each other of experience and God's dominion. They function as metaphors challenging or inviting the audience in to a deeper experience of God's dominion. A dominion that is characterized by the identification of those that are the last, the lost, the least likely, the little and the lifeless.

There are a number of ways if we were in class that I would try to fill them out more, but for now, I want you to focus on that aspect of how the parables are meant to be experienced. They are not about something that you can simply get it, as they say, and check it off that you got it, but they are intended to engage you, to challenge you,

perhaps cause a response or a reaction. So it is with this parable today.

I don't know again, it is one of those things you heard this one how many times, and oh yeah, that was this parable, or I know this, but there are all sort of ways that we need to consider how it is that people in Jesus' times would have responded to it. For example, that landowner who is mentioned, as the key character in that story. Did you like that guy? Now, if you were a fellow landowner, this might seem to be a rather foolish person who might pay this sort of strange way to the people that he had hired for that day. But if you were one of the peasants—a peasant who counted on this landowner for work, and yet who at the same time knew the sort of oppressive power that this person could hold over you. Maybe you would not be so happy, and so quick to identify that landowner as being someone good in the story.

What about these labors in the story? It is the kind of situation that still happens in many places across the world today and some of you, if you have done traveling, you have probably seen something like this. The marketplace, or the square in town, where people come in the morning and someone will come in with a truck or a bus or something and will pick anyone who is ready to go. It is the kind of thing, where in the newspaper just this week, the latest terrible bombing in Baghdad was in the market place. Terrorists had advertised that they were looking for day labors and people had gathered and then were blown up. That is probably someone also indicative of the kind of vulnerable status that these day labors have that we should hear them experience being in this parable.

As you read through this parable and heard this parable, did you see how the sort of the land owner negotiated and manipulated the whole situation? For those first workers, it said that he agreed with them for the usual daily wage. So he agreed with them it says, but when he comes back later on during the course of the day there, it says that he says to them, "Go and work and I will give you what is right." Notice it is the landowner who is going to make the decision about what is right. When he comes to those labors at the end of the day, by this time maybe you are also a little suspicious here. It says that he says, "Why aren't you working?" They said, "we have been idle all day because no one has hired us." There is a part of me that says that you have been here all day and I haven't seen you and it is because no one has hired you. Right! You were one ones who have been hiding out behind the trees there whenever anyone came through looking for workers and you are going to go home this evening and tell the wife, "Oh, I looked! No one was hiring today, I guess. I just couldn't get a job today."

In doing so notice how I have been responding and reacting to that in a little bit different way myself. Suspicious, perhaps because of people who don't pull their fair share, who don't do their work. For those who have grown up knowing responsibilities and doing that kind of work, well, I know my younger brothers. Then when it comes time to pay, the manager does it kind of differently and opposite of what should be done. It should be the first to work, the first to be paid. But he is going to reverse that. He is reversing that in order to create a tension in this story almost. It says that when the guys that only worked for an hour they get the full daily wage, they go up and each one of them is getting it. When they get to the first workers, the people that were there bright and early in the morning, that have borne the heat and scorching sun all they done, they thought that would receive more. Why did they think that they would receive more? First of all they had agreed in the morning to a certain wage, right. That is what they agreed on, so why did they feel they would receive more? Because no doubt, those people who had only worked one hour

opened up their paychecks and found that full daily wage in there, they didn't try to keep it to themselves. They probably went and were showing off that they got a full day's wage for just an hour's work.

So it was that the old bookkeeping system kicked into place there, and the one's who had worked all day long started multiplying things and they were figuring that they were going to be getting twelve times as much for having worked the whole day long. It is that which caused the problem; it is that which caused the grumbling. Usually I tell my students, don't ever use a Greek word in a sermon unless you really have to, okay. But I am going to break my own little rule just because I like this Greek word. It is just fun to say. The Greek word for grumbling is *gongyzō*. So they were there *gongyzō* and finally the landowner comes to them and says "what are you grumbling about?" It is very important here to notice what they say. They say, "these last only worked one hour, and you have made them equal to us. You made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." The owner of course replies, and he points out that he is being generous. That he gave them what they agreed to, but he is being generous to these other ones so they have no grounds for their grumbling. So he says, "it is just that you are envious because I am generous."

Now, what is terrible at this point, should be engaging you and causing responses and reactions to you, is the whole issues of fairness and equality. The thing is, people who like fairness are people who think they are deserving of something. There is something about fairness that goes against equality. How can things be fair, and be equal? Fairness breathes in equality. Those who work more deserve more. Those who work less deserve less. Those two things are going to work against each other all the time. So when people when they try to label this parable, have had trouble. Do they call it the good landowner, the generous landowner, the gracious landowner? The eccentric landowner makes sense, but the one thing you cannot charge this landowner with, is being fair. If fairness is getting what you deserve, justice, according to the way God works here, is getting what you need.

Fairness is getting what you deserve; justice is getting what you need. In this story, all the labors are getting what they need. This starts to rub wrong against us and perhaps at this point for us who have some position of privilege, especially on the world scale of things, might start to get a little nervous about how far God is doing here, what Jesus is saying that Jesus is saying that this landowner is doing. The system of bookkeeping that we keep in our own mind of who deserves what, and who ought to get this, and where fairness is involved in our country, in our workplaces, and even in our homes. You heard that issue of fairness come up in the Jonah story that was read. Do you remember it? Jonah was so upset because God was gracious and merciful, it said. Because God was being unfair by being gracious to those Ninavites that he was waiting to see their end.

I'll tell you how I learned a little bit about fairness, justice and the graciousness of God. It was 24 years ago on this very 18th Sunday after Pentecost. I was doing my internship in a congregation in Longview, Washington. I started in the beginning of June, so I had been there 3-4 months, and I was starting to feel that I was starting to get the hang of this now. I am getting the rights things done and I deserve a little respect now. So I had chosen to work with that Philippians passage that was read. Did you hear that famous line in there of Paul saying, for to me, living is Christ, and to die is gain? But as it goes on there, it sort of a strange thing as talks about, well I would rather be with the Lord, but you guys need me so much more, so I guess I will have to stick around for your sake.

The whole thing of Paul talking about his position and his relationship with them, and how much he was needed by them. What I had done, I had gone into this church, and while it wasn't as big as Trinity, it was a fairly sized church. It was Friday night, and I was going to try to get this sermon pretty much done. So what happened, was I had been working on my typewriter (Some of you remember those machines back in the old days), and I had been translating. I had just finished that part about Paul saying that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. It was close to midnight now and I was getting close to finished. I decided to get some tea, and maybe work a little bit longer. It was kind of a cool evening, and as I left my office, I went out into the main office area and the door which led from the office area into the hallway, opened up. This is midnight, it is a dark church, no one is there. As I turned that way there was a window open to the outside and here was this wild-eyed guy looking through the window at me.

Now my hair is standing straight up and it took me a moment to realize that the change in air pressure when I opened my door caused the other door to open and that wild-eyed guy I saw through the mirror was you are guessing it now—my own reflection. I was awake by now that I didn't need the tea. I went back into my office and I started reflecting about the headlines in the local newspaper the next morning. "Intern found dead in office," you know. There they would have discovered on my typewriter, the last words that I had written. For me to be living in Christ and to die is gain. And, that is when I realized that this wasn't true for me.

I wasn't ready to die, and I felt that I had things that were supposed to be coming my way, and things that were my due. It was at that time that I learned that maybe Paul was learning. Paul was preaching to himself. That we always have to be preaching to ourselves. But I also learned that the Gospel is not for those who think they deserve it, but for those who realize they need it. So I asked you, think about it, the virtues we hold so dearly. For those people who are standing in the flood waters in the ruins of their homes and businesses in the New Orleans area. Are they demanding liberty? Are they demanding fairness? Are they demanding justice? I supposed if it was justice in the divine sense of what we need, but most of all perhaps they are needing grace. When you are standing at the bedside of someone who as just found out that they have cancer, are you interested in liberty and fairness at that point? Are you interested in getting what you need—the justice of God. Of getting even what you don't deserve in terms of the grace of God.

When we stand before that final judgment throne are you going to stand there and insist upon your rights? Are you going to demand fairness at that point? If so, what will be spoken to you, will be some of the words that were spoken in this parable that I think are some of the most scary words in all of scripture. The landowner said, "Take what is yours," and I am choosing my words carefully here, "you can go to Hell." Take what is yours and go. If you stand there, and at that point you look back, and you say, but I don't want fairness, I do not want to get what I deserve. When you stand and plead for the justice of God, to get what you need, when it is with joy that you celebrate the graciousness of God, that gives what you deserve, gives you everything that you have not deserved, and it is not going to be something for nothing, it is going to be everything for Christ's sake.

When you experience that, when this parable message comes alive in your life that way, that's when you will experience what it means to be a child of God. That is when we experience how the last will be first, and the first will be last, that is when we experience this

indescribable grace of God for which we owe everything.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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