

Pentecost 16A. September 24, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Jonah, 3:10-4:11, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. 6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.' 8 When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The last will be first and the first will be last. How often have we said or thought this, especially when we were feeling like the "last." The last one to be chosen for the softball game. The first one dropped out of the spelling bee. The newest employee with the lowest paycheck. The exhausted mother who has fed her kids and now sits down with the left-overs. The last will [someday!] be first, we think.

Across the world this morning: the last child rescued from a school that collapsed in Mexico's earthquake. The last refugee allowed into a camp before the gates closed. The last person on a rooftop to be invited into a stranger's boat for transport to a dry place.

How do these "lasts" ever become "firsts?" Perhaps only in God's good time. But, do recall: our God is a God of spectacular reversals.

Noah and his family, mocked for building a boat, become the survivors. The Egyptian slaves become the chosen people. Shepherd boy David overpowers the giant Goliath. Daniel, thrown into a den of hungry lions, emerges to become a leader of the nation.

Three of the Gospel writers use this quote – albeit in different ways. Luke talks of the narrow gate through which God's faithful must pass, and declares the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Mark talks about how difficult it will be for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven: as difficult as a camel bending to go through the "eye of the needle," a narrow entryway to Jerusalem. The last shall be first and those who are first shall be last.

And Matthew appends this famous line to his story of the workers in the vineyard, all of whom were paid the same even though they worked varying lengths of time. Not an easy lesson and not one our Sequim teachers would wish to accept, and rightfully so! God's reign is not our reign, is it?

Jesus told lots of stories about the lasts being firsts and the firsts being lasts. The parable of the Good Samaritan: the least likely person befriends the man hurt on the road and is remembered as a hero. In the story of the rich man who ignored the poor man on his doorstep, the poor man dies and rests in Abraham's bosom, while the rich man endures hellfire. In the story of the two men who went up to the temple to pray, the holy man thanks God that he is not a sinner like the other man, while the other, a tax collector, begs for mercy. Which man went up to his house forgiven, Jesus asks. The sinner.

And of all the great reversals in the scriptures and our traditions, the greatest is, of course, Jesus himself. The most horrible death, the last thing anyone would wish to endure, is the preface to the raising of the "first fruits of them that sleep." The man who had nowhere to lay his head sits at the right hand of God.

There are enough lessons here for us to take to heart. God is not a God of "me first," "more for me and mine," or "my way or the highway."

Three families with school children in our town live in tents. People pass through Sequim who need money to get a meal and gas to keep going. Elders are alone and need a visit, a phone call. You might think of these people as "lasts," but our Lord sees them as "firsts." And they are the first people we are called to care for.

Thank goodness, there are people willing to reach out. I see these good people every day around here. Our school district has a woman whose job it is to help find apartments for the camping families. Sadly, affordable homes in Sequim are almost impossible to find. Our police have a fund, paid into by churches, to help the midnight travelers with their immediate needs. St. Vincent de Paul society refuses no one, as much as they are able, and sometimes are burned for their efforts. You visit one another.

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The story of the vineyard workers who all were paid the same is certainly a reminder of the income inequality that characterizes our society. The owner is the 1% and the workers the 90%.

But, with whom do we wish to identify in the story? Some of us are vineyard owners. Some of us are faithful workers who have borne the heat of the 12-hour day. But we are all 11-th hour workers, the ones hired at 5 p.m. and paid at 6 for a full day's work. Because in this story, it's all about GRACE. It's all about the vineyard owner giving the least likely workers a full measure of pay for the needs of the day.

If we got what we deserve, we'd all get one hour's pay – maybe. But God's grace doesn't work like that. God's grace is sufficient for all people, for all needs, for all time.

And if we really worship a God whose divine generosity outshines divine justice, then we are called to imitate that generosity, not to begrudge it.

Envy ruins our appreciation of what we have. The story is told of the holy man who spent his life in the desert fasting and praying. The Evil One decided he could get this man to reveal his sinful side. So he whispered in the holy man's ear that his brother had just been made Archbishop of Alexandria – and watched the envious scowl come over the holy man's face. In the Gospel story, Jesus calls the grumbling worker "Friend." Friend of grumblers, friend of those of us who are envious, friend of those who come late, friend of those who fall short of the mark.

Everyone who hears Jesus' story of the vineyard workers immediately claims, "It's not fair!" And it's not. Thank goodness! The goodness of generosity is the ruling principle in the kingdom of heaven.

God's grace and love are not fair. They are simply wonderful and joyful and they bring us to our knees in thanksgiving. We don't waste these gifts by envy, don't ignore them by complacency, nor cheapen them by willful sinning, nor take them for granted.

And, they are to be shared -- generously. We don't give up, we don't despair, we delight in reversals and trust God's amazing grace. And of all people we are most blessed. Thanks be to God. Amen.