

Sermon

Are you Envious because I am Generous?

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This week's messages both from Jonah and Matthew are messages of equality – of keeping score on some level. Now in Jonah's defense, the Ninevites are awful people who have done terrible things. Giving them grace does on some level seem wrong, even with a gracious God. In Matthew, the workers who worked a full day receive the same wage as those who worked only one hour. And they are none too pleased about that.

I could say to you that it is in our nature to be upset by these treatments of inequality but on some level I would be incorrect. Some populations have become accustomed to being given less value for their work than others. I'm not going to go into a political discussion about equal pay for equal work – or equal grace for all of God's children, but this does exist in our world and continues to be practiced – with a level of tolerance.

So what is Jesus trying to tell us here in this story of the laborers? Is it that we should be less concerned about what we receive in life compared to others? To keep our envy in check? Perhaps...is it that we should be leery of business owners who use tactics like this known as “union-busters”. Perhaps...or is it simply this. That God has provided a world where there is enough work and enough money or wages for all of us to provide a living for ourselves and for our families. Are we convinced that in this day and age that a business owner presented with this scenario would

indeed provide the same wage for the worker who provided one hour of work vs the one who worked for an entire shift? Or would that owner only pay the worker for the one hour – isn't that more along the lines of how we live?

If you ever wondered if the Hebrew God had a sense of humor, please read the Book of Jonah...for starters, the very name of the prophet suggests that this is a comedy! The word Jonah can mean dove or pigeon, and in Hosea 7:11, this bird embodies a put-down meaning “silly” or “simple”. This prophet by the name of “Pigeon” behaves less like a prophet than anyone else in the history of prophecy. And this poor Pigeon cannot escape his God-given mission. The first time he tries to end his life to escape this talk, his recuse takes the form of a huge fish. One would think he could have ridden atop the fish to get to shore, but no, he gets swallowed by it. The most holy moment in the book is Jonah's poetic prayer in chapter 2 which might seem more moving if he weren't praying from inside a fish's gut. His salvation culminates in a pile of vomit on the beach, at which point God sets him again to this abhorrent task.

He finally reaches Nineveh and utters the message God has given him and all of Nineveh responds even the livestock...and Jonah is none too happy about it. The central message of Jonah is divine compassion and mercy – even mercy for the worst of the worst. This text forces us to take evil seriously and to embrace that repentance and transformation is possible for all even in the worst of circumstances.

Jonah teaches us, as does our message from Matthew, that there is a true wideness in God's mercy and that it is God's prerogative to offer mercy

everywhere, all the time, to everyone, even if we think it is unjust, inappropriate, or not for “those people”.

I think in general we are more comfortable with the story we read in Matthew – ok, there can be fairness here – after all, the workers who only gave an hour were available for the whole day – they were there at the ready, it isn’t their fault that they weren’t chosen earlier in the day. And for most of us, we would like our boss’s to be generous, with us at least. But when mercy and love is given to those who don’t act like us, maybe we are uncomfortable with how they live or the choices they make, but good luck comes their way – are **we** envious because **God** is generous?

The parable presents a strange mix: contractual obligations for some, unexpected generosity for others. The owner’s treatment of the hired workers is such that everyone gets the opportunity to work, everyone receives enough to live—regardless of the quantity or quality of their work.² He is generous, to be sure, yet as Luise Schottroff comments, “The generosity of this landowner offers only a weak hint at what God’s generosity means.”³ Enough work for all of us in the vineyard—and resources sufficient to sustain life. Even in this “weak hint,” perhaps we may catch a glimpse of the extravagant grace of God—and it is for everyone. If we truly lean into this message, it offers all of us a beautiful freedom. You see, we don’t have to keep score. It isn’t up to us to choose who gets what and there’s plenty for all. So if my share goes to you because I don’t need it all, how does that hurt me? There are things we are able to do when we pool our resources and share together that we cannot do when we envy. Envy is really the enemy of peace and love. Love cannot exist in that environment.

Rather than being a Jonah, be the landowner – give generously and be happy for those who have been shown mercy and given an opportunity to transform and remake themselves – especially if that someone is you.

Amen