

The End of Envy

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 18th, 2011
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matt 20:1-16

“But God said to Jonah, ‘Do you do well to be angry for the plant?’ And he said, ‘Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.’ And the Lord said, ‘You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left. . . .’”

In the ways of the world, the first are first and the last are last; but today we hear Jesus say that in God’s rule, things are quite different. Jesus tells a story about a businessman who had his own bizarre way of paying his employees, and just to make sure we understand his point, Jesus repeats the punch line verbatim several times: “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

A man owned a vineyard. It must have been a quite the vineyard; and it must have been quite the crop that particular autumn. One morning, maybe about this time of year, the boss gets up early, hops in his pick-up truck, and heads to town looking for day-laborers. The problem is that every other grower in town is also looking for help, so the boss has to pay “the usual daily wage” to get the workers he needs. He loads the crew into that pick-up truck and heads back to the vines. But the harvest is so good, and the grapes are so ripe, that about 9 o’clock in the morning the boss has to go back to town to find more workers, not just once, but several times: again at noon, at 3:00 and at 5:00 in the afternoon. (This is no wimpy eight-hour work day.)

Finally, an hour before quittin’ time, the boss sees that the job just isn’t going to get done with all the workers he’s picked-up throughout the day; so one last time, about 5:00 in the afternoon, the boss goes back to town looking for a few more workers to get the grapes in. And the text doesn’t say this, but I’ll fill-in between the lines. Late that afternoon, when the boss finally gets back to town, the only ones left are those who showed up too late in the day for anybody else to hire.

“Nobody hired us,” they gripe.

“No wonder,” the boss thinks to himself, “Ya’ll look like you just got out of bed, maybe even with a bit of a hangover.”

“Well, what the heck,” the boss says, “let’s go to work.”

“What the heck,” they think, “it’s just an hour before dark. Maybe we’ll make enough to get some ‘sliders’ later on tonight.” (How’s that for filling in between the lines?)

At the end of the day, the boss is evidently feeling pretty good that he’s got the grapes harvested just in the nick of time. In fact, he seems so happy that he pays-off everybody right on the spot, beginning with that bunch of sleepy-heads who were the last to go to work. And now the clock strikes midnight.

If you’ve been listening closely to this Gospel throughout the summer months you know that it’s a story filled with stern demands, and lists of judgments, and the gavel coming down hard in the great court of the Almighty. For Matthew, “you get what you got comin’ to you,” and sometimes worse—lots of that “outer darkness. . . [and] weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“You made your bed, now you lie in it.”

“You reap what you sow.”

We kind of like those sayings, don’t we? We like it when somebody really “gets what they got comin’ to ‘em.” But listen: the ones who came last, the workers who had “stood there all day long doing nothing” and who worked for just an hour in the cool of the evening; well, they got the same money as those who had worked all day in the scorching heat.

Now, how do you like that? I’ll bet you don’t like it one bit. Why? Because you’re responsible, hard-working, dependable people who were out there early in the morning ready to go to work. In our world, the first are first and the last are last. So, the laborers who had worked all day rightly thought that they would make more than those who stood around all day long doing nothing. We understand that. The story says that “they grumbled against the landowner.” Of course, they grumbled; we would too. This is unfair: “Why should they get the same as we get? I

had to work for mine. Why shouldn't they have to work for theirs? . . . The first are first and the last are last." So, for the third time, Jesus has to say it, "the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Jonah didn't like God's ways either. In that story, the people of Ninevah don't get what they've got coming to them, so Jonah walks away in a snit and pouts about the fact that God "changed his mind" about the calamity that God was going to bring upon Ninevah. Jonah would rather die than deal with a God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Why is it that, like Jonah and the laborers, we so often prefer divine judgment when it comes to others rather than God's goodness?

"Friend, I'm doing you no wrong," says the boss, "did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? . . . with what is mine? Can I not do as I like? Or, is your eye evil because I am good? Why should you pout about my generosity?"

There's nothing wrong with the workers expecting to receive their daily wage. That's exactly what they get. They get what they were promised. The problem is envy; and envy is what destroys. We see that another person has something which we think we deserve more than he deserves, and we look upon him with the "evil, envious eye." Dante defined this as "love of one's own good perverted to a desire to deprive other people of their own good." Thomas Aquinas described envy as "sorrow about another's good."

Aesop had a fable about two eagles. One of the eagles was envious of the other because the other could soar higher and more gracefully than he could, so the envious eagle would pluck his strongest feathers from his own body and shoot them as arrows, trying to wound or kill the soaring eagle. Of course, this was the envious

eagle's own undoing. He was not able to hit the high flying eagle, and he was eventually grounded by his loss of feathers.

Envy destroyed that eagle.

Envy destroys us. It destroys the unique grace and goodness that God has wrought in each of us. In trying to destroy the other, we destroy ourselves! In trying to get what the other has, we lose what we have been given.

Studs Terkel says that the typical American attitude is, "I've got it made because I deserve it. And if you don't have it made, you don't deserve it." Then he says, "When things don't work that way, as has been the case for lots of Americans these days, a kind of meanness sets in."

Meanness. Grumbling. Meanness and grumbling set in because we think we're not getting what we rightfully deserve, what we have earned, what others do not deserve. But what if the Bible is right, and it appears that it is, when it says that God ". . . makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." Sometimes we forget that God is still God, and ". . . God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Sometimes we forget that God refuses to be pushed around by us. We forget that God doesn't make decisions based upon what we think we deserve, and what we think others deserve. Sometimes we forget that God is still God, that God is

the landowner, and we are only the laborers.

Somehow, we with our roots in European colonialism, have come to believe that we own the land, that it is ours, and that others are there to be our laborers. When you think about this story, it is we who are the laborers who came at the end of the day to work when the sun had almost set. We are the Gentiles, the nations. It was Israel, the Jewish people, who slaved throughout the long heat of sacred history. So, we reap what we did *not* plant. We Gentiles came in at the last minute and got the same wages as those who were there at the beginning of the day.

Finally, at the end of the day, finally, our only hope, whenever we got here, in whatever condition we arrived,

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at whatever hour of the day, our only hope is that Jesus will continue to eat and drink with the likes of us.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”—*DJL*

In response to some of the thoughts that were posed during our brief conversation after church service on Sunday, I would hope that I would not have been envious of those who received more money per hour worked than me. In my working career, I was not controlled by the so called forty hour week but, instead, I worked what ever hours were needed to complete the task. Also, when assigned a task, I was not interested nor guided by what my fellow workers did or received. Sure, like everyone else there are times when I noted that I worked sixty hours, whereas a fellow manager worked only forty, but I also had to evaluate whether he or I was working smart or dumb. In talking with my son, it all boils down to God loves us equally, whether we're new converts or old, established believers. Lastly, if we had more generous employers like the landowner, there would be less unemployment.—LAMB