

Proper 20 A September 24, 2017

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

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Some years ago, Tom and I were visiting the Chicago branch of grandchildren. Arriving with a seductive box of multi-flavored KrispyKreme doughnuts, we laughed at their excited glee and outstretched hands. Cooper, eight, and Grayson, six, surveyed the choices. Both, of course, wanted first pick, but our elementary-educator daughter spied a teaching opportunity, a potential for Spiritual Climate Change, if you will. Seizing the moment, Kendall exclaimed, if Jesus were here, wouldn't he step aside to let the other have first choice? The children paused, weighing their mother's words, then always-clever Cooper turned to his younger sister, "Grayson, YOU be Jesus." _____ Doesn't that sum it all up? Don't we have those occasions when we want someone else to "be Jesus," to take the initiative and act in generosity? These

everyday situations call for Spiritual Climate Change—decisive actions of love.

This morning’s parable’s depth is confrontational. From our human perspective this story seems patently unfair...the same wage was paid whether one toiled from daybreak or the final hour. This is ridiculous, we scorn, the landowner is less than an astute businessman; he’s a lousy economist and an utter failure in labor relations. Were we the break-of-dawn laborers, we’d protest the injustice, strike and demonstrate, or at the very least demand stock options and an impressive bonus.

Today’s parable of the vineyard laborers, however, teaches simple, but complex and eternal lessons. We squirm when parables disarm our secular climate of entitlement, or moral superiority, or rewards-based constant striving, but these disruptions are invitations to Spiritual Climate Change. Indeed, Jesus’ parable teaches that God’s Grace is not earned but bestowed—a most challenging concept to our “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” culture. Yet, union with

God is God's desire whether we're at the beginning, mid-point or near our journey's end.

Why we do you and I have such difficulty accepting God's generosity and calling it what it is? Our linear thinking-determining who should get what-simply won't get us to intimate relationship with God. Parables reflect our status-quo-centered lives, but ultimately parables can transform, if we let them; they can raise our unawareness and awaken us to unconditional love.

That's what happens in Matthew: Jesus reveals that God's living ethic introduces the whole realm of unmerited favor, Grace...a "last shall be first" God who invites us to think in ways utterly foreign to our "first pick of the doughnuts" mindsets. Just as the landowner returned to the village seeking workers time after time, so God in Christ Jesus relentlessly searches for you and for me. Laboring, whether for one hour or round-the-clock, is not the issue; Grace is. At day's end the bottom-line isn't so much about our search for God as God's search for us and our openness to being found.

Christianity’s spiritual climate is not a punch-in/punch-out enterprise but the fulfillment of a magnificent relationship of love and Grace that have no limitation.

Parables invite the inward expedition for Grace’s dawning light, a dawning awareness that blanket us in a hush of “ah-hah moments”. Today’s parable is a pause proclaimed from on high, a split-second cease-and-desist that calls for a Spiritual Climate Change from our standard method of striving toward an economy that is not based on a hustle-bustle way of earning our keep. In an instant of transition, parables can be tipping points....tempting spiritual morsels that allow us to enter the parable and the parable to enter us.

In today’s epistle St. Paul admonishes the Philippians: “...live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel...” That is living with parable understanding and the standing firm that God seeks from us—striving side-by-side to surrender self-centered effort, downsizing our ego from the great

“I” of the universe. Each of us, all of us, needs God. Our call is to accept God’s grace and help our community do the same.

No matter who seems to be granted the greater portion. No matter who seems to have the easier vineyards to tend. No matter how many are publicly rewarded while some struggle unrecognized. No matter where you are in life; no matter what time it is in your life, God is searching for you. For this reason, the last words of this morning’s story, “the first shall be last and the last first”, far from sounding a note of reproach and faultfinding, leave a note of urgent persuasion. Jesus reveals it’s not about good and bad, those convenient dichotomies, neat constructs to step around people and experiences that refuse to fit into the molds our minds create. There is nothing more important than a Spiritual Climate Change that enables us to come to grips with our real, bottom-line questions: do we want to be found by God and are we open to accept God’s Grace? Amen.