

Sermon – Matthew 20:1-16; Jonah 3:10-4:11

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Grace Lutheran Church

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“God Being God”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This past Wednesday, our Cornerstones Bible study met for the first time since March. We had been shuttered due to the pandemic and the regular summer break, but we reconvened this week on Zoom. After looking at the readings from Jonah and Matthew, one woman said, “The thing about these stories is that the humans are so human.” Her comment is worth the weight of several Bible commentaries. These narratives work so well, both to convict and to proclaim God’s reign of grace, because everyone plays to type. The humans are human. God is God. Guess who gets their way in the end? Guess who isn’t too happy about it?
2. Since the last shall be first, let’s look first at Jesus’ parable, the last he speaks before entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner.” It has been a bumper year for his crops, and he needs help. Early in the morning he finds the go-getters, hires them, and sends them to work. So again, at nine, and noon, and three, and five. At the end of the day he pulls out pay envelopes and gives them to the 5:00 crew first. They find, much to their delighted surprise, a full day’s wage. Call it six crisp twenties. The other workers start doing the math. They thought they were working for \$10/hour, but the owner just gave these last \$120! The six-in-the-morning crowd starts crunching numbers; they should now be getting \$1,440. But in the end, they get the same pay as those late to the field. Even though they had agreed to

this wage, the primal cry goes up, a call so human that every two-year old speaks it: "That's not fair!"

3. The parabolic workers parrot the prophet Jonah, who did not want to go and preach repentance to the Ninevites precisely because he knows what his God is like. Sure enough, after a detour with a big fish, he preaches repentance to the sinners of Nineveh and they repent. Sackcloth and ashes, as if that makes up for generations of rampant sin. But it's good enough for God, who relents. Jonah, who is nothing if not bold, pokes his finger in the divine chest, saying, "What gives, bub? I'll tell ya what: You're doing exactly what you always do, going around with grace and mercy; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Jonah is livid, not because God surprised him but because God is so predictable. Would it kill God just once to take it out on sinful humans who, as luck would have it, are also people Jonah doesn't much care for? It's not fair!

4. If there's a takeaway for today, it's simple: God isn't fair, and thank God for that. Are the Ninevites, sinners yes, but also created in God's image, not worth more than a bush that sprang up one day and died the next? Is God to discard them so lightly, even if they do deserve it? And what of these one-hour workers who swept in at the last minute only to get a full, and very much more than fair, share? Can God not do what God pleases? Must God bend to our notions of fairness? One can imagine the thought bubbles over the heads of their fellow, longer workers: *What slackers! They couldn't be bothered to show up until 5:00. And they expect a handout, as much as us? What a bunch of entitled so-and-sos!* Perhaps the landowner sees what they do not, what we do not. Perhaps those who couldn't come until 5:00 were the single mothers who couldn't arrange childcare; perhaps they were people with disabilities who didn't have access to transportation; perhaps they had to go through a government checkpoint or stay home to supervise their children during remote learning. And yes, perhaps, some of them were lazy

ne'er-do-wells who couldn't be bothered until late in the day. What of it? Is it not within God's rights to be God? To show mercy and grace where mercy and grace are needed, not where they are deserved?

5. In last Sunday's parable, Jesus proclaimed that God is out of the debt collecting business. Today, Jesus demands that we leave behind our keeping of accounts, too. God's kingdom is one of capacious grace; to insist on keeping strict accounts in such a place is foolishness. Immediately after telling this parable, Jesus tells it straight, and for the third time: He is going to Jerusalem, and he is going to die. Would it kill God to punish sinners once in a while, Jonah might have mused? No, instead it would kill God to forgive them. God takes all that is God's and gives it away through the death of Jesus Christ, who trades places with us so that in his condemnation we find forgiveness; in his death we find life. This gift of grace cannot be given out in different-sized chunks based on what we've earned. For one thing, grace is grace; it won't be subdivided. It is given the same to all. For another, it can't be given based on what we've earned because we haven't earned a bit of it. It's all or nothing, and Jesus descends into nothing so that we would have it all. God will insist upon being God, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love, even though it will quite literally cost Jesus his life.
6. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who pays everyone not fairly, but equitably. The kingdom of heaven is the reality in which there is enough to go around and it actually gets around. The Jesus who tells us this parable is the same Jesus who teaches us to pray, "on earth as it is in heaven." So it is that this parable does not simply convict us of our sin and promise us entry into the coming kingdom. It stakes a claim on how we live today. We live in a world in which the income gap has grown beyond all reasonable proportion; we occupy a country in which the rich have gotten richer during this pandemic and have done so on the backs of the poor. And we sleep well at night telling ourselves it's okay because it's fair. The rich should get to keep

what they work for. To some extent, sure, but to this degree? Now, honest people of goodwill can have reasonable disagreements about *what* to do about the great gap between the rich and the poor, about *how* to fix this problem, about the role of government and private charity and so on. But people of God cannot say it's not a problem. The wealthy lounging in luxury while the poor choose between food, housing, and healthcare is *exactly* what the prophets spoke against. They did so because it is sin. The good news, sinners, is that Jesus forgives you. But he does not give you a pass. On earth as it is in heaven. As we pray it, so shall we work for it.

7. And it can be done! I'm not sure if you've ever heard of the Atlantic Philanthropies. I hadn't, not until they closed their doors this week. Why? Because the founder, Chuck Feeney, has accomplished his mission. He gave almost all of his wealth to charity while he was still living, to the tune of \$8 billion. Oh, he did sock away \$2 million to provide for his retirement. Nevertheless, he has given away 375,000% more of his wealth than he has kept. He pioneered the idea of Giving While Living because, he says, "it's a lot more fun to give while you live than give while you're dead." Feeney could have kept his fortune. It was his, fair-and-square. But fairness is a pretty poor goal. Much better to think less about what you deserve to keep; much better to think about what another person needs. I'm pretty sure I'll never have \$2 million, let alone \$8 billion, at my disposal, but the question is the same: Will I hide greed under the lie of human fairness, or will I work for the good of my neighbor? Christ did not die for us because God is fair. If we were to get from God what we deserve, well, that would be it for us. No, we get mercy and grace from the God who insists upon being God. In Jesus, it's all grace. Through him, let us put aside human ways and embrace this new life in Christ.
8. This week we mourn the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In 2017, she said in an interview, "I tell law students... if you are going to be a lawyer and

just practice your profession, you have a skill... But if you want to be a true professional, you will do something outside yourself... something that makes life a little better for people less fortunate than you." May her memory be for a blessing. We find meaning in life not by earning and keeping for our sake, but by giving and sharing for Jesus' sake, that all may enjoy the abundance of God. Jesus Christ died to open the kingdom of heaven to all of us, even though not a one of us deserves it. As he died for us, may we live for others. Why does it matter what they've earned? Let us see one another through the eyes of Christ, asking only how we can be a blessing to others. God will keep being God, like it or not. We might as well leave our old human sin at the foot of the cross and live in and with the mercy of God. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.