

Ordinary 25A
September 21, 2008
Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

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

Which Would You Prefer: Justice, or Grace?

As some of you are already aware, my husband and I live on Picatinny Arsenal. You probably haven't met too many people who live there. It's a very small post, by Army standards. We have only about 65 families who live there.

This is the first time we've ever lived on an Army post. I thought I was ready for it, and in fact, I was looking forward to it. It didn't take me long to realize, though, that living in such a small community brings with it a whole host of new and different realities. I'll simply say that it's worse than living in a small town, and leave it at that.

On the flip side, though, is that having such a small community means that you also get to know your neighbors pretty well. I have taken particular delight in getting to know some of the children.

I tell you all of this as a segue to the following story: One day last year my doorbell rings. When I go to answer it I find three girls, ranging in age from probably 8 to 11. One of them tells me that they're going around the neighborhood trying to collect donations. "Oh," I say, "And what are you taking donations for?"

She sheepishly replies, “We’re trying to buy a hamper.”

It was all I could do at that point to keep a straight face. I asked them all sorts of questions, like: how much they thought it would cost for the hamper, the cage, food, toys and whatnot; who was going to keep the hamper; and, most importantly, if their parents knew of their plan. She sort of bobbled on that last question, and finally came out with an, “Of course!” Somehow I doubted the truth of that...

I told them that I wouldn’t be able to give them anything, BUT they could earn some money by washing my car. They quickly agreed to that, so we gathered up a bucket, soap, sponges and towels and they set to work.

While the girls were washing my car I called the apparent ringleader’s mother. As you might well imagine, she was horrified to learn of their antics. I told her not to worry, that I hadn’t given them any money but told them they could earn it. She thanked me for how I’d handled the situation, and especially thanked me for cuing her in to their escapades.

Just a few minutes later I looked out the window to see how things were coming along. I saw two girls working very industriously, but the third had apparently lit off for parts unknown. Hmmm...

Funny, though, that when it came time to get paid she was “Johnny-on-the-

Spot.” This presented me with a bit of a moral dilemma. Do I split up the money between the three of them – or, as I’m thinking, the two who actually did the work? Or was it possible that Miss #3 had done some work that I hadn’t seen? Had the other two sent her off with their permission? Wouldn’t this be a good opportunity to teach them about the rewards of hard work? *<pause>*

After brief consideration, I gave the entire amount to the ringleader, thanked them, and sent them on their way.

† † †

So I’ll let you decide – was my final decision just, or was it gracious? Would it have been more just of me to ask each girl how much work she’d done, then portion out the pay according to how much work each had done? Or, was there a bit of grace involved, in treating all three equally? What do you think? *<pause>*

Now granted, this is probably a poor analogy to today’s Gospel reading from Matthew. We’ve all heard this story before, and I’m sure you all know the point that Jesus was making when he told this story of the workers in the vineyard: God will be every bit as gracious to those who are late coming to Him as he will be to those who have been faithful their entire lives. It’s not up to us to decide just how much grace God should mete out to each according to our own system of standards. It’s up to God. And God will be gracious to all believers alike. The reward is the same

for all of us.

But somehow it's human nature for us to identify with those workers who were called to work in the vineyard early in the day. Jesus knew that when he told the story. We feel like we're the ones who've been laboring longer in the kingdom, and that for our labors we somehow deserve more than the latecomers. That's just simple justice. It's not fair that the latecomers should get paid the same as the earlybirds, right?

But, "Life isn't fair, and truth be told, God isn't fair either... and for that we ought to be profoundly grateful. If God were fair, if God gave us what we deserved, we'd all be in serious trouble. Instead, Jesus took what we deserve to the cross so that we all might receive by faith what we don't deserve: mercy, grace, forgiveness, love."¹

The reality is that we're all latecomers. In this parable, we're not the ones who are hired at the first of the day – we are the ones who are hired LAST. "We are all people who can open the envelope at the end of every day and laugh out loud at the sheer generosity of the One who has called us to work in the vineyard of this world and gives us so much more than we deserve. If we'll see ourselves as latecomers and God as an outrageously generous God, I suspect we'll live more joyfully and more generously."²

† † †

There is an old rabbinic parable about a farmer that had two sons. As soon as they were old enough to walk, he took them to the fields and he taught them everything that he knew about growing crops and raising animals. When he got too old to work, the two boys took over the chores of the farm and when the father died, they had found their working together so meaningful that they decided to keep their partnership. So each brother contributed what he could and during every harvest season, they would divide equally what they had corporately produced.

Across the years the elder brother never married. The younger brother did marry and had eight wonderful children. Some years later when they were having a wonderful harvest, the old bachelor brother thought to himself one night, “My brother has ten mouths to feed. I only have one. He really needs more of his harvest than I do, but I know he is much too fair to renegotiate. I know what I’ll do. In the dead of the night when he is already asleep, I’ll take some of what I have put in my barn and I’ll slip it over into his barn to help him feed his children.”

At the very same time the old bachelor was thinking this, the younger brother was thinking to himself, “God has given me these wonderful children. My brother hasn’t been so fortunate. He really needs more of this harvest for his old age than I do, but I know him. He’s much too fair. He’ll never renegotiate. I know what I’ll do.

In the dead of night when he's asleep, I'll take some of what I've put in my barn and slip it over into his barn.”

And so one night when the moon was full, those two brothers came face to face, each on a mission of generosity. The old rabbi said that there wasn't a cloud in the sky that night, but a gentle rain began to fall. God wept for joy because two of his children had gotten the point. Two of his children had come to realize that generosity is the deepest characteristic of the holy and because we are made in God's image, our being generous is the secret to our joy as well. ³

Life is not fair. Thank God! It's not fair because it's rooted in grace.

Amen.

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¹ The Toolkit, 9/20/2008-9/21/2008 (Burnsville, MN: Changing Church Forum, 2008), p. 7.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 7-8