

jSermon on Matthew 20:1-16
16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 20, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. Kind of like today. But a long time ago, God called a man named Jonah, to go to the heart of the Evil Empire called Assyria, the feared enemy of Israel, and preach the gospel of repentance and forgiveness. Jonah was reluctant to go, but in the end he did preach that message, at least the “repentance” part, in what may be the shortest, or the “worst sermon in the Bible” . But just to show that God has a sense of humor, Jonah’s awful diatribe was most effective - because of the power of God’s grace, and perhaps because the sermon was so ridiculously short! After first running away from God’s call, being lost at sea during a great storm, thrown overboard by the crew and swallowed by a whale, he found himself spit out by the fish on the shore of the great city of Nineveh, the city to which God had called him. So Jonah walked the streets of that immense city, the capitol of the Assyrian empire, preaching a warning: *“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* Then Jonah went outside the city to sit in the shade and witness the wrath of God on that city. But a strange thing happened in response to his sermon of law without gospel: *And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth - by order of the king.* It was not what Jonah expected or even wanted. He never had wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place to preach to those heathens, he never considered that they might miraculously repent of their sins - he thought God should punish them for their wickedness. *But God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”* God’s grace was miraculous and lavish, undeserved by a wicked population, but granted simply because they repented and believed.

But Jonah, ever the reluctant prophet, became angry against God and pouted. He even prayed his protest to the Lord: *“I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. So please, Lord, take my life from me.”* Jonah’s dramatic reaction is all too typical of many people of faith, as we are often jealous of other people’s good fortune or unhappy when our enemies are saved or forgiven. But the Lord said to Jonah, *“Why should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons?”* For God will have mercy on whom God will have mercy. But the Lord’s justice is often just too far beyond our human comprehension.

And so is the story in today's gospel - it's incomprehensible to us! It's the Parable of the Vineyard, which has befuddled so many Christian preachers and disciples of Jesus. It is incomprehensible to us, as well as those who heard Jesus first tell the parable, and the workers who had labored all day, that workers who only worked one hour in the vineyard at the end of day would receive the same generous pay for a full day's work - one *denarius* - as they did. It wasn't fair, to those who worked hard all day in the summer's heat, and it doesn't look fair to us, either, who look back 20 centuries later with the same sense of "fairness". Because we look at this with the "old math" we have learned from our youth: you are paid a certain hourly rate for the number of hours you worked, no more, no less, and anyone who receives a better rate for a lesser amount of work isn't fair to us! But God has a whole "new math" working here, in which God's abundance, God's mercy is lavish far beyond our human calculations, and the goal is not fairness, it's forgiveness, grace, and new life in God's kingdom. In other words, God's justice is not limited to "what's fair", for God's "new math" is "good news" - newness of life for all! Because God's "equity" is not the same as what we call "equal" or fair.

We've already heard the story, and it's a familiar one to most, so I won't repeat it here. Just to say that the day-long workers, who had worked so hard and then witnessed the one-hour newcomers receive the same generous entire day's worth of pay which THEY THEMSELVES had agreed to, expected to be paid substantially MORE for hours more of work. Yet when they received the same amount as the "newcomers", THEY GRUMBLED. They sound so much like the prophet Jonah when he grumbled and complained to God about those "too late for repentance residents of Ninevah", when they said, *'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!'* Exactly the same grievance that Jonah brought to the Lord, with the same mathematical equation: "I worked so hard for my salvation, and deserve it; they worked too little, and too late, and do not deserve the salvation of the Lord." But is there a limit to God's abundance, to the mercy God can bestow, like the pie of only 6 equal pieces to share? The landowner gave the day-workers essentially the same answer that God gave to Jonah: *"Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go....or are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first and the first will be last."*

God's new math. It's incomprehensible to us humans - just as new middle school math can be incomprehensible to us parents who learned a different way in our youth, than our children do today! We can all relate, both to parents struggling with new math for this generation, and the day laborers who struggled with the fairness of it all. Haven't we all seen and experienced such injustice? Life is not fair - we learn too soon and too often. But all we do is complain.

So let's take a deeper dive into scripture, deeper even than this parable's challenge, and consider the whole gospel of Matthew and Jesus's teachings about the Kingdom of God - (God's new math)! For this kingdom, or realm of God, this new existence set forth as Jesus's promise, is nothing like the world in which we live on earth today. Thanks to Luther Seminary professor Karoline Lewis, who in her Working Preacher *Brainwave* discussion reminds us that in order to understand this parable, we have to look to Jesus' greatest Sermon on the Mount, where he laid out the newness of God's Kingdom in the *Beatitudes*. Remember this bold new proclamation of God's favor? Jesus declared God's blessings for the poor in spirit, for those who mourn, for the meek, for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for the merciful, for the pure in heart, for the peacemakers, for those who are persecuted, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!* Those blessed by God were totally opposite to those whom we humans commonly consider as blessed (those who are strong and bold, the rich and powerful, who won't take "no" for an answer and those who conquer the world). Jesus turned our whole human notion of who is favored and blessed by God on its head. Then he invited his disciples to follow him to learn about this strange, new world, this Kingdom of God. They were intrigued, and bold enough to follow, even when they didn't get it!

So what is this new world Jesus invites us to? What is this Kingdom of God like? It is like the fisherman who leaves his nets behind to seek it, or the merchant who leaves her business to follow Jesus. It is like someone who sells everything he or she owns to buy a field of hidden treasure, or to buy one pearl of great value. It is like someone who is called by Jesus to forgive their neighbor not just "seven times" but SEVENTY-TIMES SEVEN - now THAT'S "new math"! It is like a king who forgives the debt of a subject who owes 10,000 talents - and a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep and goes to seek out one who is lost! It is like a multitude of 5000 hungry people fed with just 2 fish sandwiches and end up with leftovers! It is like a farmer who scatters seed on the ground and overnight it bears fruit, he knows not how. It is like a woman adding a little yeast to three hunks of dough and they all rise! It is like the tiniest of mustard seeds that grows into the greatest shrub of all where birds build their nests. It is like a landowner who promises a generous living wage to all his day-workers, and pays them all this same wage no matter how short a time they have worked! "What kind of new math is this?" my friend, seminary professor Rolf Jacobson asks in *Working Preacher?* It's challenging. It's unreal, irrational, even incomprehensible to most of us! But that's the invitation Jesus gives. To you and to me. Leave behind the old standards and rules that the present world gives, that bind us all and leave us making grievances against each other - even against God! Let it all go, and try Jesus' new math of forgiveness and grace, where God deletes all the old marks against us, and let's

you and me start all over again, forgiven, absolved, new creations in God's new world! Amen.