

## September 24, 17th Sunday After Pentecost

Introduction to themes for the day

We love to belt out two biggies from the Christian hit parade, “*Amazing Grace*” and “*Jesus Loves Me*”. What happens when absurd parables scandalize us at the prospect that God loves everybody and we’re expected to do the same? That one’s a bit tougher to sing from the roof tops because we think there are those undeserving. Or...as happens to Jesus, loving everybody, gets us into trouble.

Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ 7They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ 9When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, ‘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.’ 13But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15Am I not allowed to do what*

*I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?  
16So the last will be first, and the first will be last. ”*

Sermon: This is no way to run a vineyard, corporation or government; paying three day's wages for an hour's work when everybody else has busted their chops all day. True. Also true- Jesus says God runs things pretty much that way where the last are first and the first are last.

“Firsties” aren’t gonna be happy! Many of the parables Jesus tells that we’ll hear for a few weeks seem to speak to the objection that Jesus prefers the losers and spends too much time with them. Today’s last group of hirelings were losers. Most likely they were old, had disabilities, or maybe just weren’t good workers. These last to be hired were likely ALWAYS “last pick” whether on the playground, home-town or the marketplace. And today the vineyard owner hands out the pay packets and makes them EQUAL to everybody else???? Are you sure you want to belt out that next verse of “Amazing Grace” just now?

Orange tee shirts, signs reading “Black Lives Matter” and cross walks painted in rainbow colours rile up some people. Maybe we “firsties” fear that when someone gets long overdue relief, reparation, or recognition, we’ll have something taken from us. That seems the way the world runs....let “seem” be the operative word here. Do we dare impose limits on God, as in how much and whom God can love? We dare and sometimes we do.

The good news is that God keeps on loving whether we like it or not.

For my money, as shocking as Jesus’ parable is, I think Jonah’s whopper of a story shocks even deeper. The story is designed to be ridiculous and funny even before that creative crew from Veggie Tales got a hold of it. God gives Jonah lousy job speaking on God’s behalf to a people whose leaders who elevated cruelty to a fine art. I’ll spare you detailed examples so as not to spoil your lunch later today. If I’m honest, I sit with Jonah underneath that broom tree and can’t get my head around why God would care for people who were so cruel. Jonah must have really liked

that bush because when it withered, he wanted to wither right along with it. And God sits with us there too. And God loving engages us even though the question is jarring, “Do we care so much for that lovely little sheltering plant, yet so little for these bad actors, who are enslaved without even knowing it?”

God lovingly asks us if we’re jealous when people we judge as “less than” are also loved? The realm of God, even when presented in parable and a fantastical fish story, envisions a dismantling of systems that enslave and oppress... One day in God’s good time when captive and oppressed are freed, the captor and the oppressor will be liberated too. The reign of God is like that, Jesus says.