

September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020

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

After Pentecost 16, a

Remember the story of the Prodigal son? There were two brothers, the older one always stayed with his father and did the work that was needed to be done. He helped his family and was very responsible. His younger brother, not so much. His younger brother asked his father for his inheritance, took it and squandered it. Then when the younger brother found himself eating with the pigs, he decided it was time to come home.

The dad threw a huge block party, invited as many as he could think of to welcome his younger son home. The dad put rings on his younger son's fingers and robes across his shoulders. The father threw a feast, welcoming his youngest son back home.

Meanwhile, older son, having been the responsible son in the family, felt stilted, of course. He had worked hard, stayed the course, had not caused trouble, but seemingly had not received even a thank you from his father, let alone a feast. And of course he said as much to his father in the middle of all the celebration for his younger brother. His father affirmed to his older son, that indeed, he had stayed the

course as an older son and been responsible, but, regardless, it was time to celebrate the return of his younger brother.

It has been written that Matthew's original audience, as well as most of us today, would have identified with the Prodigal Son's *older* brother --as well as have identified with the "first-hires" in today's gospel. Remember, Jesus tells the parable of the landowner needing help in the vineyard. The landowner went out early in the morning and hired laborers for his vineyard and promised them the usual daily wage. The workday was 12 hours. Then the landowner realized he needed more laborers, so at 9am, he went out again and hired more laborers and told them he would pay them "whatever is right". Then he went out again and hired more laborers at noon, at 3:00pm and at 5:00pm. The last hires worked for only an hour. And as you may remember, at the end of the day, he paid all the laborers the same wage, regardless of the time they worked.

Well, of course the first hires were not happy campers. "They grumbled against the landowner. [But the landowner said], 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong.... I choose to give to this last, the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?'"

So, why do we identify with the prodigal son's older brother and the first hired hands in today's gospel? Because "life is not fair".

But --these lessons are not about life as we know it and experience it. These lessons are about life lived in God's mercy. These lessons are not about what we *deserve*. In fact, there is nothing in these lessons that is about what we deserve or do not deserve. These lessons are about God's grace. God's grace is not the sort of thing you can bargain with or try to store up. God's grace isn't the sort of thing that one person can have a lot of and someone else only a little. These lessons of Jesus are not just about who we are; they are about who we are *in the Holy Spirit*. There could not be any more of a contrast of who we are in the world and who we are in the Spirit.

Everything we know about life in this world today tells us how unfair the treatment was to the older son and to the first hired workers. But Jesus isn't telling us a parable about this world *as it is*. He is telling us a parable of the kingdom, that is, of the world as *God wants it to be*, a world where everyone is treated the same, despite what they've contributed or despite what they have, a world, where everyone is accorded the same dignity and respect, regardless. The parables are not about deserving, but rather about being known and

accepted, loved and redeemed, not because of who we are or what we have done.

Remember the prayer that Jesus taught us that we say nearly every time we meet. We pray for God's kingdom come and for God's will be done. "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth*, as it is in heaven."

We are praying for the world God desires, a world where all people, --good, bad or indifferent, a world where all people, --those who are responsible and those who are irresponsible, a world where all people, those who are faithful in their service to God and those who are not, --we are praying for the world *God desires*, where *all people* are treated with dignity and respect, mercy and grace.

Soon after the beginning of the Reformation of 1530, the Wittenberg altarpiece of 1547 was painted by Cranach the Elder. The center panel of the piece depicts the Lord's Supper. Other than Christ depicting himself, Cranach models the twelve disciples after actual citizens of Wittenberg. Luther is easily recognized in the painting: he is the one receiving the chalice. Sitting in front of Luther is Hans Luft, a printer who published the complete German Bible.

Maurice of Saxony is depicted as Judas. Maurice of Saxony had originally supported the Reformation but then betrayed its ideals for his

own gain. And yet, depicted in the painting, Jesus feeds a morsel of bread to Judas, or Maurice of Saxony, demonstrating that the good news of salvation through the body and blood of Jesus extends to everybody, regardless, --good, bad or indifferent, responsible or irresponsible, faithful in their service to God or not.

All people in God's world are treated with dignity and respect, mercy and grace.

Rudy Mueller posted this, this week. "Yesterday on the TODAY show, a group of "deserving" students were surprised with personal computers.

The kingdom of heaven is like a TV show that gives cool stuff to an undeserving group of kids. Maybe the ones in juvenile detention.

Maybe the ones who repeatedly skip confirmation class.

Maybe the ones who live on the streets and beg, borrow and steal to get by. Maybe the ones who get F's all the time.

What makes someone deserving of life in the kingdom?

The cross of Jesus Christ.

All people in God's world are treated with dignity and respect, mercy and grace. Amen, Pastor Scales