

JONAH 3:10-4:11

10 When 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.

4But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2He prayed to the Lord and said, 'O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 3And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.' 4And the Lord said, 'Is it right for you to be angry?' 5Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

9 But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' 10Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

MATTHEW 20:1-16

1"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the laborers 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 laborers 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

The kingdom of heaven is like a householder, a man who went to the market at 6 am to recruit a few workers. He found a few able-bodied men and women, agreed with them on the usual, fair daily wage, and off they went, to pick grapes in the vineyard.

Now, a bit later in the day, sometime around 9 am, the man realized that he needed more help in order to get all the harvesting done, so he returned to the marketplace. When he arrived, he found a few more workers, looking for a job to do. Who knows why they weren't there at 6am...perhaps they had children to wake, dress, feed, and get off to school. But whatever the reason, they were there at 9, and the householder said, come and work for me. I'll pay you whatever is fair. The workers agreed, and off they went to pick grapes in his vineyard.

Now, throughout the day, the vineyard owner would stroll back to the marketplace, looking for more folks to help with the harvest. At noon, at three, and even at five pm, an hour before closing time! And in each case the vineyard owner and the workers agreed: we'll help with your harvest in return for whatever is fair, one might assume the appropriate portion of a full day's wage, prorated for the number of hours worked.

At six pm the bells rang out across the vineyard and all of the workers brought their heavy, grape laden baskets in to be collected. And the vineyard owner said to his human resources director, line them up, from the latest to the earliest, so that I may pay them.

So, the workers lined up. Five o'clock, three o'clock, noon, 9 am, and 6 am, waiting for their appropriate wage. And as they came forward, the HR director did something surprising, she handed those Five o'clock workers a full day's wage, as if they had worked all 12 hours, not just the one! And again, with the three o'clock workers...a full day's wage, not merely for the 3 they had worked! The noon and the 9 am workers, it was all the same, a full day's pay, for less than they had worked. Now, the last workers left were those 6am hires...the faithful few who had put in a full day's work. All 12 long, hot hours of picking. They were sweaty, exhausted, and excited. Because, of course, they hoped to receive more than a full day's wage for their work...after all, they had put in far more work than the other workers! But, much to their dismay, the HR director handed each person one day's wage. Exactly what they had agreed to at 6am, but not what they had come to expect.

The 6am workers were enraged. They shouted back at the vineyard owner, "How dare you!? We worked all day! 12 hours! In the hot, hot sun, burning our necks and breaking our backs to pick your grapes! You paid those other workers, those lazy, lay about fellows who did so much less work, you paid them more than they deserved...so where is our fair share!? We demand more."

And the vineyard owner responded, “I haven’t done anything wrong here. We agreed, did we not, that you would work for a full day’s wage? Yes. We agreed. So, take your money and go. It’s not your place to tell me what to do with money, how to spend it, or what deals I strike with other workers. Aren’t I allowed to do with my own money what I wish? Are you mad at me because I was generous? Take your money and go.”

One of the things that’s funny about the new testament is that we sometimes we read it and think, “well, that’s a nice story.” But the other day I was reading the news paper, and right there, in black and white, was this story. The parable of the boss and his workers, in real life!

The kingdom of heaven is like a man named Dan. Dan owned his own business, had for a number of years, a credit card processing company he started while he was in college. Dan was a thoughtful guy, well liked in the community, and he provided a local flair to a usually somewhat impersonal business service. All the vendors at the local Public Market, from the fish guy to the flower lady to the foreign language magazine seller used Dan’s credit card processing scheme. And people were pretty happy about it.

Dan had many workers in his company, graphic designers, computer programmers, office administrators, receptionists, loading dock people, and many others, 120 people in total. And everyone was paid fairly, according to what convention and the marketplace dictated their salaries should be. As the CEO, Dan made one million dollars. The graphic designers and computer programmers were pleased with their low-six-figure sums. The receptionist and the

dock workers made do with 30,000 a year, although many of them had to commute long distances into the office, because they couldn't afford to live within the city limits on their salaries.

And then one night Dan went out to dinner with his friend. She worked at a different company, making 40,000 dollars a year, and she shared with him the pinch she felt, trying to make ends meet, pay off student loans, and live simply on her salary. Dan had no idea, and he started to wonder about his own employees, those men and women making far less than 40,000 dollars a year. How did they make ends meet?

And so one day, not too long after this conversation, Dan called his Human Resources director and had her gather together all of his employees. And then he made them a great new deal: every worker in Dan's company would now be making at least 70,000 dollars each year. Everyone. From the dock workers to the receptionist. No one in Dan's company would make less than 70,000 dollars a year. And those workers who made much more than 70,000, well, Dan gave each of them a small raise, too. Dan told his people that in order to do this he would cut his own salary from one million dollars down to 70,000 dollars each year, and that the company would also pull from their own profits in order to make this work. Dan stood in front of his employees and said to them, "I'm not doing this to make you happy. I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do."

Now, time passed, and things started to change at Dan's company. Sometimes for the good. A dock worker told Dan he could now afford to buy desperately needed new tires for his beat up old car. Another office worker said she could now take a trip to see her

mother, which she hadn't been able to afford for three years. The company was flooded with requests to use their products, from other companies who were pleased with the change. Other changes were harder to take. Dan himself started to realize that the neighborhood his company was in was far too expensive for him to live in, even making 70,000 a year. Dan opened his house to a few rent-paying roommates in order to make ends meet. A few of the oldest customers of Dan's business started to worry that maybe the company would raise costs in order to cover larger salaries. And other changes, well, they were the hardest to weather. Maisey was a financial advisor who had worked at Dan's company, putting in long, hard hours for over five years. Maisey was greatly angered that the lowest paid employees were given raises amounting to well over 100%, while she and other higher paid employees were given far smaller raises by overall percentage. Maisey was concerned this kind of decision put too much weight on the lowest-skilled employees, and she quit. Grant, a computer programmer who received a 75% raise, complained that these raises encouraged people to simply "clock in and clock out" but not be hard workers. He said "they shackle the highest performers to the least motivated." However, his pay was good enough he decided to stay. Other business owners in Dan's city began to complain that their workers would expect more. Radio personalities across the USA crowed that Dan's company was a socialist hotbed, and that it would surely fail under the weight of such unnecessarily large salaries.

And the fact is, the jury is still out on Dan and his company. It remains to be seen whether he can provide these salaries to his employees and make enough money on the product at the same time. Time will tell.

Here's the deal with parables, they're challenging and they should provoke a range of responses from us. They should make us feel a little uncomfortable, and we don't really know exactly how they end or what to make of them. John and I were talking about this parable the other day and he described it as "a poke in the eye." Like Jesus just sort of walked up to people, poked them in the eye, and then walked away. Jesus just sort of puts these stories out there and then leaves them for us to grapple with. And so I'm not going to tell you what you should think, I'll just leave you with what Jesus says here, "The kingdom of heaven is like a business owner, who goes out and hires people, and then pays them all enough to be considered a daily wage, no matter how long they worked or what kind of work they did." This is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.