

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Jonah 3:10--4:11 Philippians 1:21-30 Matthew 20:1-16
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
September 20, 2020

Today Jesus gives us the challenging parable of the workers in the vineyard. First let's look at those who were hired first. Notice, they make a verbal agreement with the landowner. They're working according to a contract. You and I are familiar with contracts, we follow them every day. Typically a contract works like this: I put in X amount of sacrifice for you, and you balance it out by giving me X amount of reward. Pretty simple. When you think of it, practically everything in our lives and relationships is governed by that equation, one way or another. If I'm going to make dinner every day, you should probably do the dishes occasionally. Even in our deepest love relationships: with our spouses or our children for example, there's a contractual element. There's got to be a basic sense of equal give and take. Otherwise we get into trouble with each other. Because no matter how hard we might try not to, it's part of our sinful nature to take more than we give. So contracts are important in a broken world. They give both parties somewhat equal power to influence the relationship. Everyone in this world enters into contracts, whether they're spoken or unspoken, almost every day.

So the early workers in the vineyard in today's parable are operating on this fifty-fifty, contractual relationship with the owner of the vineyard. At first they're happy with the arrangement: one denarius for one day's work. Typical wages.

But then you have the late workers. Notice, there's no clear contract expressed there. They're just standing there in the square, looking for something to do. And as the day gets longer, they're probably getting more and more desperate. Like, when I go home tonight, I'll have nothing to give my wife and kids. So when the owner of the vineyard offers me a couple hours of work later in the day, at 3 o'clock or 5 o'clock, I take it. I'll take whatever I can get. At least I

won't go home with nothing tonight. No contract necessary. I'm just thankful for whatever I get. I'll throw myself on the generosity of this landowner, because hey, I've got nothing else.

Well: we've already gotten to the heart of the parable! I've just described two different universes. The one universe at its very core operates by a contract. The other universe operates by grace. In this short parable, Jesus is forcing us to wrestle with where we are between those two different universes today. To what extent do I think my life is about a contract? To what extent is my life governed just by equal give and take according to my measuring stick of fairness? I like thinking of everything in terms of a contract because it gives me 50% control of every relationship I have and everything I do. And the more I insist on my life being about a contract, the more I'm not going to like it when anything takes any of my control away from the nice equal relationship.

And that's the issue with those first workers in the vineyard. Notice, they're perfectly happy with the contract at the start of the day. They know exactly what to expect. They're going to get a good day's wages. So what makes them mad? It's when the owner of the vineyard shows his freedom to go beyond the contract and give those other workers whatever he wants. He hasn't broken his contract with the early workers one bit. They wanted control over the reward they would receive at the end of the day; he hasn't taken one bit of that control away from them. They get exactly what they agreed to. And the owner sees exactly what's bugging them: "You can't handle my freedom to be generous and do what I want with my power," he tells them. One consistent thing you see throughout scripture is that when God is accused of being unfair, it's because he's giving someone more than they deserve rather than less. Look at Jonah, in the first reading! So control is a big part of it. And if everything about our lives is wound up in a sense of contract...equal give and take...then we're always, one way or another, putting ourselves at the center of our calculations. My control, my piece of the pie, is what I'm concerned with.

And another basic truth that comes with that. When our lives are governed by a sense of contract, we can only know ourselves by comparing ourselves to other people. I judge myself by what other people have and what they do. And I guess that wouldn't be so bad if we didn't rig the game all the time to come out on top of whatever mountain it is we think we're climbing. It's sad when life becomes all about comparing our piece of the pie to other people's slices.

But then there are those latecomers in the parable. No contract for them. No agreement. They have no control over what the landowner is going to give them at the end of the day. They're just thankful someone gave them work, thankful they can bring something home that day. There's no contract, so they can rely on only one thing: the landowner himself. For people who have no control over their relationship with their boss, everything depends on the character of their boss, doesn't it! Well, Jesus is painting a picture of a pretty amazing boss here, who seems to like giving his money away freely. He seems to like being generous. Whereas the first angry workers are standing there at the end of the day comparing themselves with the other workers who came after them, the late workers can only see one thing at the end of the day: a powerful person who has given them way more than they deserve. And think of how they feel going home to their spouses and kids that night: thank you, thank you, thank you, Mr. Vineyard Owner!

So Jesus is showing two different universes coming together in one parable here. The one universe operates by contract, the other by the generosity of the owner. Now for us believers, I don't think it's simple, cut and dry...not like it's either we're living by one or the other. Of course we have to enter into contracts with each other all the time in our relationships! Even our marriages are defined by vows, by an agreement we make with each other. And we need those contracts, because of our sinfulness. We need to give each other power and say in our relationships with contracts. We have to spell things out with each other a lot. What Jesus is

getting at is that relationship at the core of our lives. It's something we need to be reminded of all the time. Because it changes the nature of all the contracts we live by.

It's way too easy for me as a modern American to see my whole life in terms of a contract where I'm at least half in control of everything in my life. I'm always expecting my piece of the pie. Compared with most of the world, I'm rich. But that doesn't keep me from feeling entitled to more, more, more all the time. But it's funny, lately, I've been getting these intuitions. It's like, my left knee doesn't work quite right anymore. My shoulder doesn't seem like it fits as well into its socket as it should. Lately I've been thinking, maybe the list of amazing things I was going to accomplish in my life is going to have to be shortened a little bit, to more modest proportions. And I understand more and more that the things that I invest the most effort in in this life; like marriage, like parenting, like ministry—I'm starting to realize that I will probably not 100% complete my mission in those areas that are most important to me. What I'm getting at here, is that if my whole life has been lived by a contract where I have 50% control over the amount of pie I get at the end of the day, then as the days and years go by, I'll sense the truth of my situation more and more: I don't have real control over any of those things I think are most important, most vital to me. If my life is all about contracts, then I'm going to end up facing death, trying to have half control over it. That's the final truth of a life lived by contract.

Jesus came to uncover the relationship at the core of our lives; a relationship that can never, ever be a mutual contract. All the contracts of this life will be broken and there will be no pie left. The only thing left will only be that relationship that was always there at the core of our lives, whether we acknowledged it or not: Our relationship with the owner of the vineyard. And Jesus makes it clear: you and I have no say in what he gives us. We are completely dependent on him for whatever reward we get at the end of the day. No contract we come up with can hold him. All we can do is trust him, or not trust him.

So everything depends on his character. And here's the gift you and I live with every day: Jesus shows us the owner's character with everything he does...most fully in giving his life on the cross for each of us in this room. Wouldn't it be better not to wait till the end of the day to realize that we aren't in control of the outcome anymore? Wouldn't it be better if we can just go out into the vineyard first thing every morning saying **Thank you, thank you, thank you!**