

SPG#182, Pentecost 19A  
September 21, 2008

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Philippians 1:21-27

Matthew 20:1-16

For those of you who have visited us in our home, you probably have met our Basset Hound, Lily. I could tell you all about Lily, about her gentleness, about her playfulness.

I could tell you how her long floppy ears dip in her water dish as she drinks.

And I could tell you more things about Lily. But the real experience of Lily is in actually getting to know her and being in her presence. And for those of you who have heard about Lily, you should look forward to the day sometime when you will meet her.

In a similar vein today's gospel reading is one of those provocative and puzzling stories that we have come to appreciate in the four gospels. And regardless of how many times we have heard the story, and whatever we bring to the story, the real experience of appreciating this gospel reading is in our wrestling with it in the present tense today. Jesus is the teller of the story as he speaks to his disciples. He begins, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard." After finding some day laborers he worked out an agreement with them for a daily wage and sent them into the vineyard. Later he came back to the marketplace and found more laborers. He talked with these and sent them into the vineyard to work.

He found others later and sent them in. About 5 o'clock he found still another group and sent them in. When the day came to an end he was paying the workers. The workers who had been there all day discovered that he paid them the same as the workers who had arrived late. Those who had been there all day were put out.

They in effect said, "This is not fair." The landowner said, "You agreed to a daily wage. That is what you have been paid. I choose to give to these late arrivals the same as you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

Jesus ends the story by saying, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

To encounter this story is at once provocative and exasperating. On the one hand the workers who had worked all day seem to have been treated unfairly because they were paid the same amount as the workers who had arrived late. On the other hand they had agreed to a daily wage. And there was no stipulation that if they worked all day they would receive more. In addition the landowner certainly could pay the agreed upon wage to whoever worked. It was his money to pay out. Recently when I read this story after not having read it for some time I noticed some things in my reaction to it. I thought that the all day workers had a point. Why should those who worked less receive the same? But I also realized that all the workers got paid what they had agreed to. And I realized that it was the landowner's money to spend as he chose. So, my realizations in the story seemed to run together. Everyone in the story seems to have a valid standpoint: the all day workers because they had worked longer, the part day workers because they got paid what had been agreed upon, and the landowner who can pay out his money as he chooses.

So we find ourselves in a conundrum with this gospel reading, a catch 22 situation. And yet we are not strangers to this type of a situation in life. Consider the uncomfortable news on the economy coming out of Wall Street this past week. For an economic system to work, investors must trust the system. And yet many investors these days are not trusting the system. So we are not strangers to this kind of ambiguity in life.

And we are not strangers to this type of provocation in the gospels. So, none of us are strangers to ambiguity and conundrums, or to catch 22 situations.

And because our lives tend to be connected to such ambiguities and discomforts these days, the head on wrestling with this gospel is that much more unpleasant. And because it is unpleasant there is the temptation to turn away and to tune out our ambiguous world, and to avoid the hard lesson of this gospel reading. But if we were to avoid the lesson in this gospel I think Matthew would be disappointed.

Rather Matthew would have us wrestle with this part of the word of God to the point that we face our frustration, not only with the reading but with the realities of our own day. So, again, the reading assumes increased meaning as we are able to engage in reflecting on our own lives. The reading assumes increased meaning as we allow ourselves to be affected by it.

So, in these reflections, as we are affected by the reading of the landowner and the laborers, is the implicit lesson about taking heart and having courage in ambiguous times when everyone seems to have a valid point?

To be sure there is eventually an energy and a sense of being uplifted as we can appreciate both the point of view of the landowner and the laborers. I recall when I taught philosophy for DMACC years ago there was an energy created in class when we were all able to appreciate opposing points of view in the class at the same time.

Sisters and brothers in Christ the world is in dire need of people who can with courage and creativity face the complexities of our day. The effect of your own courage and creativity is as close as your next conversation.

But I would be doing the word of God and you a disservice if I ended this sermon extolling the virtues of our own courage and creativity.

For as much as the story of the landowner and the laborers leads us back to ourselves and our own times it leads us more toward the recognition of our humanity, that our help is in the Lord. It leads us toward the realization that there is a fairness that comes first from God. Our courage and creativity will not be abundant if we insist on measuring life only with our own limited sense of what is fair.

Over 200 years ago the Rev. Timothy Dwight, a Congregational minister, delivered a sermon entitled "The Sovereignty of God." Throughout the sermon Dwight asks the questions: "Why does life at times seem unfair? Why do some people in life seem to have more opportunity for thriving and others less?" Finally, at the end, in the face of all his difficult questions Rev. Dwight acknowledges the mystery of the righteousness of God, or as he calls it the sovereignty of God.

He acknowledges that as humans it is from our acceptance of the sovereignty of God that our courage and creativity flow. He acknowledges that God's righteousness transcends our own sense of fairness. And he ends his sermon with a stirring quote from the prophet Isaiah.

He says that if the people acknowledge and celebrate the sovereignty of God, the righteousness of God, then they will mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

And I would add one point to Rev. Dwight's fine sermon. And that is that as Christians, people of the Holy Scripture, we are called upon to wrestle with some ambiguous and uncomfortable realities within that Holy Scripture. And as much as we are called upon to face ambiguity in everyday life, we are also called upon to face it as students of the scripture. For it is in that wrestling, that discomfort that we are thrown back on an awareness of the limits of human ideas of fairness. And we are thrown back on an appreciation of the righteousness of God.

In the Old Testament, the man Job faced the discomfort of losing everything, his wife, his children, his possessions. And as he struggled and wrestled mightily in that discomfort, his answer in the end was his encounter of the presence of God.

We could say that if he had just acknowledged that in the first place, it would have been easier. But Job was too much like us. For his appreciation of God's presence came through his being willing to face the discomfort.

As we face the ambiguities of Hurricane Ike, of suffering on a massive scale; as we face the ambiguity of questions about the economy, about war, about terrorism, hopefully we will find a key that finally appears for us in this gospel, that our help is in the Lord, that he who watches over us slumbers not, nor sleeps, that the unseen courage, creativity, strength, and love that we need to live triumphantly in these ambiguous and complex days comes from God.

Then, if we can know that, if we can remind each other of this truth, we will mount up with wings as eagles. We will run and not be weary. We will walk and not faint. Amen.