

## Learning to Live by the Math of a Generous God

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45

Matthew 20:1-16

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Have you ever hurried to get to a store or a museum just before closing time? It closes at 5:00 and you get there at 4:45. You just want to pick up milk and juice and bread, just a few quick things. Or you just want to buzz through the main part of the museum exhibit to say you have been to the National Gallery and seen the Rembrandts, just the highlights. You expect to have to rush through. Get your groceries or see your paintings really quick because you arrived so late. But the person at the entrance says- "oh please take your time, we are keeping the place open as long as you like, just for you. You can have as much time as the person who was here at opening time this morning." You feel unbelievably surprised and blessed.

You imagine the checker person or the museum guard feels less excited than you about staying open the extra hours. But then you discover it is their absolute delight to give you all the time and space you want and need to take full advantage of the place.

Let that be an image in your mind of the meaning behind this parable of Jesus about the vineyard owner and his workers, the ones who are hired at start of day- 9:00 in the morning, the ones hired at lunchtime, noon, the ones who are hired in time for mid afternoon tea 3:00, and then those who are hired near quitting time, at 5:00 in the afternoon.

When it comes time for pay, common sense and fair play say the persons who came earliest at 9:00, should get the most pay, right? And on down the line, the ones who came at 12, at 3 and at 5, each percentage a little less. In fact, if the five o'clock crowd is given the amount typical for a full day of pay, (a denarius was worth in today's currency \$1.15. But let's say the hourly rate is \$10 an hour or \$80, you would fully be expecting the ones who began at 9:00 to get eight times that, or \$800. I mean fair's fair. The all-day crowd have worked their little fannies off under the blazing sun, pruning the vines, picking the grapes. They deserve more than the latecomers. Right?

Ah- not so with this landowner. This landowner gives the latecomers the very same fair daily pay as those who had been working all or most of the day. They all get the same.

Now, this is not a model for how to run a farm, or a factory. This is not an example of the beauty of communism. This is a picture of the generosity of God. And up against it we see the smallness, the covetousness, the competitiveness of the workers. Each group envious of the others.

Obviously, the landowner is an image of God and teaches us about the nature of God and God's gracious generosity to the undeserving. As Paul writes in Romans, "For a good

person one might choose to die, but God chooses to die for us while we were sinners". While we were undeserving.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases that verse like this, in the Message,

"We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him."<sup>i</sup>

Our parable portrays the vast difference between God's math and ours. God's math is nothing but loving and gracious, full of mercy and overlooking the fact that we haven't been in church since the Easter before Covid. Oh, to be sure God is also going to be our Judge at the last day, "He shall come again to judge both the living and the dead." That's what the Creed says. The Book of Common Prayer has a meaningful daily prayer, "Make us both afraid and ashamed to offend Thee." You see we are dealing here with Holy God. God's grace is costly not cheap. God does not want us to be the 5:00 workers. But God is overall gracious and generous, extending love forgiveness and welcome and spiritual riches to all, all the time, far beyond anything we deserve. To the 5:00pm arrivals same as the 9:00am arrivals.

Now our ushers and we pastors will notice- "Hey you're back, it's been awhile. Nice to see you, but it's been awhile. Yes, it has and sure we are glad you are back. But we probably are not going to nominate you for elder or president of the PW if that's as much as you show up, every other Christmas or Easter. "Your SHPC congregational rules state, for example that only those who are regular in church attendance and on record of regular pledging, or at the very least regular giving shall be elected to church office. That is the way the church, and your business and probably your household and daily lives operate. There has to be some standard and some sense of accountability, before responsibility is given. Right?

Yet, God the Father is operating on a whole different level. That is why the Christian life is utterly counterculture. That is why grace is so radical. While certainly wanting us here to worship and praise him, and grow in him, and be shaped more into his kingdom values as we continue to grow in his grace, nevertheless God does not count like we count or measure like we measure. God's ways are not like our ways. "For as the heavens are higher than the Earth, so are my ways higher than your ways."

God the Father welcomes and receives us even to the last minute- like the father welcoming his prodigal son home - the repentant thief on the cross who pleaded with the dying Savior, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus from his cross replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise,"<sup>ii</sup> and received him.

We serve a generous gracious God. This picture of God does not start in the New Testament, but from the very beginning God is generous in his mercy, in his grace, in his forgiveness. Adam and Eve deserve eternal death and damnation for their defiance of God's

specific command not to go beyond his limits and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Instead God gives them another chance. Yes, outside the Garden of Eden, that place of absolute perfection, heaven on earth, and makes their way bitter and hard and their life on earth only for a limited time. Yet God provides a way for them, where there is no way.

Jonah, in our Old Testament Lesson, has done everything he knows to do to thwart the generosity of God, but God is still wooing him. When Jonah refuses God's command to go to Nineveh, and flees his assignment, instead taking a ship to Tarshish, God sends a great storm that in the end leads the pagan sailors to appease God's anger by throwing Jonah into the sea so that he is swallowed by a great fish. Yet out of his grace and generosity God causes the fish to spew Jonah out onto dry land.

God speaks a second time and says, "Now go to Nineveh and preach the message that I tell you. This time Jonah hears and obeys God. Jonah from his human point of view point is surveying how very wicked the Ninevites are. He halfheartedly preaches, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"<sup>iii</sup> Jonah is ready for God's hellfire and destruction, expecting ok now boy are these guys going to get theirs!

But lo and behold, the Ninevites fast. They put on sackcloth. Everyone, the whole city, repents. And God, seeing their repentance, how they turn from their evil ways, changes his mind about the destruction. Yes, God changes his mind and spares them.

You would think Jonah would rejoice at God's mercy in sparing them, as much as we rejoice when what seems ominous and destructive before us is averted through our prayers. Instead Jonah reacts like these 9:00am workers. He goes out and pouts. "Yes God, I knew that you are gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. So, take my life, I cannot handle your radical generosity. I cannot abide being around these repentant sinners." And through the image of a bush that shades him from the heat, God protects him. Only next day to have a worm attack the bush so that it withers, as a parable to Jonah of God's generous mercy and grace for these 120,000 plus Ninevites plus all their animals. Indeed, Jonah understands the Lord is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding an steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. "Jonah just isn't willing to accept God's generosity.

Message for us is – welcome the latecomers who get the same fair daily pay as the whole day workers. Welcome the persons who come to faith late as much as those nurtured from their infancy (which ideally, we prefer and our faith teaches). Point is all who come are to be welcomed equally.

Let me turn this a little and try to tell you through a few vignettes that happened last week during my trip to and from San Diego for the Trustees Meeting of the Outreach Foundation of the Presbyterian Church, what God's gracious generosity looks like. The analogies will be imperfect- but maybe you will be able to identify.

Vignette one - first, on the way out I had a flight that changed in Houston. But we sat on the tarmac in Birmingham after boarding, boarding for an hour and a half, all the while the cabin was hot like it is before they turn on the engines. For a few minutes- no problem. For an hour and a half not exactly a picnic, and the stewardesses didn't even bring us a bottle of water.

Arriving late in Houston, my connecting flight to San Diego had just taken off. What to do? Well I checked the departure board and found there was another flight leaving for San Diego in two hours. So, I hustled to the shuttle train to the next terminal and found my way to the gate. The nice attendant checked and found I had already been re-routed and given a seat on this plane. A grace moment. Now I would get there, only at 11:30pm instead of 7:30pm, O.k.

So, grateful, but hot and tired and hungry I went down the terminal to a nearby restaurant. It was one of those where you have to order on-line. I hate those. Yes, I have an I phone and all that, but I prefer the personal touch. Well I ordered, on-line then waited, and waited and waited. Finally, after 30 minutes I went up to the bartender and asked rather curtly the fellow there, "Do you think my order went through? It's been a long time, and I have missed my plane and not even gotten what I ordered to drink. "Of course, sir, here first let me get you that drink sir, and I will check on your food." He did, and in a minute or two he brought it to my table. He continued to check on me every five minutes, refilled my water, two or three times, offered me a to-go plate and cup. Could not have been nicer."

At the counter as I paid, I thanked him for his kindness and told him how much I appreciated his care and attention. He said, "Oh no problem at all sir, I used to be a grief counselor. And I figure a lot of you all in the terminal are dealing with some grief about something that has not gone right with your travel, so I do all I can to make you feel a little better." That fellow's spirit was a grace moment for me.

Vignette two –

Contrast that with a woman at the gate next to mine. She had a baby in a stroller and was obviously distressed that she had missed getting on her flight. The door had been shut, even though the plane was still at the gate, outside, and she was screaming at the top of her lungs at the poor young gate attendant. "Let me on! I must get on!" He apologized and explained there was nothing he could do. She kept screaming, and I jumped in and said, "Hey ma'am, there's nothing he can do." Instantly I became the object of her wrath. Now she began screaming and cursing at me." I turned and jumped on to my own flight. Quick!

Vignette three – Third- When I flew back from San Diego on Tuesday afternoon I ended up having the whole row to myself. So often most of the people on planes these days keep their shades pulled down. At night sometimes, that makes sense if you need to sleep. But on this beautiful afternoon? F About half the folks on board had their shades down. They missed what I saw as I gazed out the window. It was a veritable gallery of abundant beauty as we traveled on this clear afternoon halfway across this continent from San Diego to Dallas. Taking

off we flew out over the blue, blue Pacific. Looping back, we flew over the stunning skyscrapers of downtown San Diego, and the suburbs beyond. In just a moment we were high over a white desert. A few minutes more and the desert turned to mile after mile of lush green farmland laid out in grids, the lands of big agribusiness that feed much of this country and the world. Then the fields turned to high gray granite jagged mountains, and then more white deserts. Then clouds of all sorts with golden rays of the setting sun out that window creating a beautiful radiant fiery frame. Finally, then the darkness of night and in only two hours the vast twinkling lights of the urban "Dallas-Ft. Worth area.

So much beauty. But so many had missed it all. Their shades were down. It is like that with so many who don't follow Jesus, and also so many who do but miss the beauty. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote,

"Earth is crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees  
Takes off his shoes –  
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.

My friends I am calling you to see, to open the eyes of your heart and see the grandeur of God, see the generosity of God for you, and live by God's higher math. Live like the waiter in the airport restaurant, not the screaming angry woman at the ticket counter.

For sure tough times will come your way, lots tougher than sitting in a hot airplane and missing a flight. Maybe you have missed some big opportunities in life. Maybe you have spouted off at a spouse or child? Maybe you have demanded what you think you are owed for the work you have done, rather than the fair wages your heavenly Father gives you out of his generous heart. "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous? So, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Tom Long writes about this parable,

"At the end of the day all who have labored in God's vineyard, all who have served in the work of the kingdom, will be lavished with the "daily wage" of heaven: all the treasure of God. Suddenly we see plainly the true poverty of the first hour workers. Everybody in the parable is tendered with the wealth of the kingdom, the deep river of providence flows through everybody's life. God gives everyone a daily wage so extravagant that no one could ever spend it all. A deluge of grace descends on all; torrents of joy and blessing fall everywhere. And there these first-hour workers stand, drenched in God's mercy, an ocean of peace running down their faces, clutching their little contracts and whining that they deserve more..."

The landowner is free to do what he will with what he owns, and he uses this freedom to be generous. (Mt. 20:15). The same is true of God. 'The earth is the LORD's and all

that is in it,' and, despite our schemes of religious merit and competition, God chooses to be generous. To the leper, to the lame, to the Gentile, to the last and the least, God is merciful"<sup>iv</sup>

It is interesting that Matthew tells us before and after the parable the truth of God's radical generosity, Verse 19:30, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Verse 20: So, the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Are you envious because God chooses to be generous – Jonah, disciples, church? Welcome this generous God generously into your life and ask God to change you day by day and bit by bit into a person of radical generosity.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene Peterson, The Message, Romans 5:7-8. p. 313

<sup>ii</sup> Like 23:42-43

<sup>iii</sup> Jonah 3:4-5

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas Long, Matthew, p.226