

"What is Right"

Jonah 3:10 - 4:11 & Matthew 20:1-16

September 21, 2008

A pastor was retiring after 30 years of ministry. As he came to clear out his office he found a small bowl with 5 eggs and \$1,000 inside a drawer that had been used by the church secretary who had also faithfully served the church through those 30 years.

Baffled by what he had found he called the secretary and asked about the contents of the bowl.

"Oh," she said " I suppose that we have known each other long enough that I can tell you. I must confess that every time you preach a bad sermon I put an egg in the basket"

The pastor thought quickly and was pleased with himself: "Not bad five bad sermons in 30 years". And then he followed up with the question, "And what about the \$1,000?" To which the secretary responded, "Well every time I got a dozen, I sold them!"

I don't suppose that a pastor is a good one to judge his / her own sermons and maybe not even the sermons of others. I think of the sermon that is recorded in the book of Jonah prior to our text for today. It was simple - simplistic, really. It should have had no effect on the hearers what-so-ever. "Forty more days and your city will be destroyed." That was it - the whole sermon. And Jonah's heart wasn't even in it. But a whole city of 120,000 people responded. Maybe I should cut back from the normal 17 minutes and just get right to the point. And then there is Jesus. Preaching in parables can be pretty good stuff - it is good story time and I bet folks loved it. But sometimes the parables made no sense - they did not fit reality - they probably just made folks mad. Certainly this parable about laborers getting paid the same no matter how long they worked would not have set well with a lot of the people - I bet the secretary would put an egg in the basket for that one. Yet, here we are 2000 years later with that sermon before us.

A landowner goes out throughout the day to hire workers it is a pretty good story. We would probably be quick to point out how unfair the situation is. Still, it is a good story. But as I thought about this teaching parable of Jesus, it seemed to me that it was really much more. In fact, it seemed to me that this parable is exactly why the church is so important for our world today. Our world needs the voice of God to call us to think and live in new ways. It seems to me that this parable speaks to the very heart of our struggling economy and the fears and anxiety that have sent our nation into an economic panic. I have to say that I really don't

understand Wall Street and the stock market. I don't understand how the Dow-Jones can lose 10 % of it's value in two days. I can not fathom how 700 billion dollars can be lost in pension funds and how the life savings and retirement funds of many can be devastated by the collapse of a couple of businesses. But it is all a part of our days. The politicians talk about greed and inappropriate business practices. Everyone points fingers at everyone else as levels of fear and anxiety continue to rise. We all want at least as much if not more than we think that we deserve. And Jesus tells a story about a landowner who hires workers and then at the end of the day does something that seems absolutely crazy. Both the first and the last receive what they need.

We are a people who are raised with a keen sense of fairness. We are pretty clear about what is right and wrong. And what the landowner does by paying all of the workers the same amount, no matter how many hours each worked, seems clearly wrong. We are quick to look after our own interests - - - the only way we would ever be happy with what happens in the parable would be if we were the one hired for the last hour of the work day. What kind of radical notion is Jesus pushing here?

I loved reading about Johnny Carson, who was hosting the Tonight Show one night and made a joke about there being a toilet paper shortage in the city. The next day there really was a shortage because all the viewers who had watched his show ran out afterward and bought up extra toilet paper just in case. Greed - or at least the desire to fulfill our own needs over the needs of others takes over - even if it is just toilet paper that we are talking about. What a great image of who we are as people. We want all of the toilet paper we can get - let everyone else take care of themselves. We panic and grab not what they needed, but more than they needed, leaving others with nothing at all.

Yes, I love this parable as Jesus tells it. It is a great sermon. It is about the kingdom of heaven. It is about God and how God thinks and operates. It is a good sermon for us to hear as we live with the fears of our day and the economic struggles that we have been walking through.

Did you hear what the landowner told each group of workers as He called them to go and work in the vineyard? To the first, the landowner promised a days wage - a days wage was considered to be the amount of money that a person needed for normal living for a day. To the rest, he simply promised that he would pay them 'whatever was right'. I don't know ... it seems to me that it takes a bit of trust to go to work for someone on such an open ended contract. What is ... whatever is right? Is it 'right' to provide a minimum hourly wage as set by federal law? Is it 'right' to pay the going rate in the neighborhood? What is right? The landowner came to the end of the day and called all of the workers together and obviously said to

himself: What is right is that everyone has enough to live on. It did not matter if the person was lucky enough to find work at the beginning of the day or was so unfortunate that by 5:00 in the evening still no one had come along to hire him - no matter, everyone needs enough to live on for another day. Apparently, in the mind of the landowner, that was what was right.

I know that it sounds crazy - it runs counter to the way we think about life. We are obsessed with 'fairness'. We don't want to see anyone get more than they deserve [unless we are the ones getting the bonus]. We would never go for some communistic or socialistic economic system. But perhaps just maybe we could begin to understand that what is right is that everyone is loved by God - everyone has needs that it is right to fulfill. Perhaps we can see that God really is concerned with everyone and the kingdom of heaven is overflowing with grace for all.

One time a Sunday school superintendent was registering two new sisters in Sunday School. When she asked them how old they were one replied, "We're both seven. My birthday is April 8th and my sister's is April 20th." That superintendent replied, "That's impossible girls." The other sister then spoke up and said, "No it's true, one of us is adopted." "Oh," the superintendent said, "Which one?" The two sisters looked at each other and one said, "We asked Dad that question awhile ago, but he just looked at us and said that he loved us both equally, so much so that he couldn't remember which one of us was adapted."

And so God looks at us and invites us to look at each other - all children of God - our needs no more important than another - all loved and provided for. {There will be a basket for eggs in the office this next week}.