

## PENTECOST: ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT OF HOPE

**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 18, 2005**

**Proper 20**

**Jonah 3:10—4:11**

**Psalm 145:1-8**

**Philippians 1:21-30**

**Matthew 20:1-16**

### **What's Fair?**

Shouldn't those who've worked longer hours receive more pay? The parable of the workers in the vineyard presents us with a dilemma that runs counter to our present-day understanding of work ethic. The writer of Matthew's Gospel has positioned this parable as a conclusion to a series of four examples of God's reversal of humankind's understanding of the order of things.

Chapter 19 of Matthew's Gospel begins with Jesus' teaching on divorce and his admonishment to the Pharisees that divorce is not part of God's plan and resulted from their own hard-heartedness (verse 8). In the next example, Jesus lifts up children who, in Jesus' day, were among those marginalized by societal standards. But it is children, Jesus says, to whom "the kingdom of heaven belongs" (verse 14, *NRSV*). And in the case of the rich young man who faithfully keeps the commandments, he is denied the kingdom of heaven because of his inability to part with his possessions and follow Jesus (verses 21-23). What's fair?

The parable of the workers in the vineyard points us to the character of God and God's nature to reverse the standards by which humans tend to make judgments. The workers who grumble against the landowner are challenged by the landowner's question, "are you envious because I am generous?" (verse 15, *NRSV*). Generous? Yes! Our God is a generous God! God's "standard" is one of grace, not merit. If God were "fair" (in the way humankind envisions the term), we would deserve only condemnation since all of us "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23, *NRSV*). But thanks be to God that "we are now justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24, *NRSV*). What a generous God!

The workers grumbled that they did not receive what they felt they deserved (verses 11, 12). Peter expressed his concern for what he and the disciples would receive since they left everything to follow Jesus (19:27). Jonah became angry and was displeased when God spared the people of Nineveh (Jonah 4:1). Is God "unfair?" Thankfully, yes! God is "gracious ... and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to

relent from punishing” (Jonah 4:2, *NRSV*). What a wonderful God who rewards us, *not* as we deserve, but with the gift of salvation and eternal life!

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in:** Cambodia - With thanks to God for the successful distribution of the Khmer Children’s Bible, and with prayers for those working on the Protestant edition; Thailand - With thanks to God for the impact of the Thai-English Bible reprinted in 2004, and with prayers for God’s blessing on the revision of the Thai Bible; Taiwan (republic of China) - With prayers for the expansion of publication plans and for God’s blessing on three projects: the Art Bible with reproductions of classic European Renaissance art, the Illustrated Bible that combines the Chinese Union Version with high-quality illustrations for contemporary families, and the Chinese Study Bible that explains difficult passages and provides background information about Bible life and times.

**Activity Corner:** “In Praise of God’s Love and Mercy” Prayer  
Supplies needed: Bible; writing paper; pens and or pencils.

Read together Psalm 145:1-9. This psalm focuses on God’s goodness and mercy. Encourage members of your household to discuss ways in which they have experienced God’s love and mercy. Invite everyone to write a prayer of thanksgiving based on these experiences and to share their prayers during family devotional time. Conclude the reading of the psalm by inviting everyone to respond together with verses 8 and 9 from whatever translation is being used.

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