Getting to Yes

September 18, 2005 (Proper 20, Year A)

Jonah 3:10-4:11 Psalm 145 Philippians 1:21-27 Matthew 20:1-16

My sophomore year in college I spent a summer as an intern with Harvard Law School's Program on Negotiation. I learned a lot that summer: For example, I learned you can live for weeks on instant couscous and sub sandwiches from the back of a Chinese take-out truck.

I also learned how to pack books into boxes. Most of my work as an intern with the Program on Negotiation involved packing teaching materials into cardboard boxes for mailing. One of the most requested books was titled Getting to YES. [1]

What I liked most about Getting to YES was a simple lesson that Jesus taught 2000 years ago, a lesson that God taught to Job generations before Jesus, that true winning generally has nothing to do with making the other party lose. The measure of a successful negotiation was fairly getting what you desired, not making the other guy suffer more.

It's a lesson that became obvious when I was flying this week to visit my mom. There were 150 of us in line to be crammed on an Airbus 320. What amazed me was how people would queue up, jostling for position with their 42-inches of carry-on luggage, trying to be the first ones on the plane. But you know, whether they get on the plane first or last, we were all going to get to our destination at the same time!

In Jesus' parable, the workers in the vineyard who labored all day received the wages they had been promised. That late-comer workers received the same wage for only a few hours work took no money away from those who had worked all day.

Jesus had been teaching the good and difficult news that God's Kingdom was open to tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, foreigners, women and other undesirables. This parable was a reminder to the pious that the generosity of God's kingdom was a generosity justly given to *everyone*, with neither penalty nor favor to the well-dressed and well-connected. To protest about God's love for the unclean was to be like the whining workers; to protest about the mercy of God's love was to fall into the trap of Jonah's bitter, humiliated pride.

For Matthew, Jesus' parable became a story of how God's abundant grace could be given to foreigners and strangers and Johnny-come-lately Gentiles as well as Jewish members of the church whose families had followed God for generations, through slavery, temple and exodus.

And today for me, I find it is easy to notice the not unfamiliar frustration of the first-hour, crack-of-dawn workers -- jealous when the landowner's generosity to the last-minute workers doesn't tickle-down to surprise bonuses for everyone else. Those newcomers haven't shared in the struggles of the past. They haven't earned their stripes!

I don't always hear the hours of boredom, fear and hunger that the last-minute workers endured: *And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, `Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, `Because no one has hired us.'*

It was looking like a day without food for the un-hired workers and for the families depending on them. I don't know if you've ever gone by a street-corner where day-laborers are waiting for work. [2] In Seattle, in the mornings, a group of men, mostly Latino would wait to be hired, picked up, and taken to work. Busy and bustling in the morning, that corner was a pretty sad place in the early afternoon. Left behind are men who would much rather be working than wondering if they will eat that day.

[1] by Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton.

[2] For one viewpoint of the life and work of modern day-laborers, visit http://www.ndlon.org/

In Jesus' parable, the last-minute workers are thrilled to have received a full day's wages;
they have finally gotten what they have hoped for all day during the long hours standing, hoping, in the market place.

One of the many things I love about Messiah is that some of us have been here for decades, some of us for a few years, some of us for a few months. We come from Episcopalian, Protestant, and Roman Catholic backgrounds. Some of us, like me, have spent years away from church, standing around idle in the marketplace, if you will, consciously or unconsciously waiting for that call. In other words, we're not a group just of first-hour workers or last-minute arrivals. We have been sharing the abundance of God's love, **not** connecting that abundance to a sense of how long you've served on vestry.

And today, we're opening up our doors to music and fun and joy, welcoming in neighbors and celebrating God's abundance, folks who live down the street, people who drive by, BITC parents and AA members. You can listen to bluegrass and eat homemade goodies whether you've worked for years to keep this building standing or whether you happened to walk by today and heard the bagpipes.

That is our good news to share; this is a place of generosity, we are the good managers giving freely out of the abundance God shares with the whole world.

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