

In *The Sign of Jonas* Thomas Merton writes, *God makes us ask ourselves questions most often when God intends to resolve them. Any perplexity is liable to be a spiritual gestation, leading to a new birth and a mystical regeneration.* Seeing perplexity as spiritual pregnancy makes an otherwise distressing experience hopeful.

Both Jonah and Job know perplexity, but for different reasons. Job is perplexed by the absence of a merciful God; Jonah is perplexed by the presence of a merciful God. How can God let the righteous Job suffer and spare the wicked city of Nineveh?

Nineveh was the seat of the greatest enemy of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The entire book of "Nahum" gloats over the fall of Nineveh, calling the Assyrian capitol a *city of bloodshed, all of it deceit, filled with plunder.* According to long-held beliefs, according to the calculus of justice, Nineveh must be destroyed.

Some prophets shrank from preaching because they saw no hope; Jonah refuses to preach because he knows there is hope. Some prophets complained about the wrath of God; Jonah protests the perverse compassion of God. Jonah remains an unreconstructed Israelite nationalist; God remains an unreconstructed universalist. Jonah would rather die than be perplexed by the mercy of God shown to the wicked.

The parable Jesus tells of the generous land owner shatters conventional norms and expectations. Those who labored one hour received the same wage as those who labored three hours, six hours, nine hours, or twelve hours. This is so out of wack that one wonders who would work for this landowner again or why anyone would show up in the market place before five o'clock. Either way, the grapes would become raisins instead of wine.

The landowner has honored his contract with those who started work at 6:00 am. This is the only group that was given a stipulated wage, a wage they found agreeable. So what is the injustice suffered by these laborers? They tell us: *YOU MADE THEM EQUAL TO US!* I don't imagine this was said in an even tone.

Jonah is asked if he has a right to be angry because God is merciful. The landowner tells those who worked all day they don't have a right to be angry because they received exactly what they agreed to. Management and labor are at odds. Labor feels demeaned, disrespected. This could get ugly. After all, Cain's envy of his brother Abel, fueled by anger, led to murder.

The landowner agrees to pay those who begin work at 9:00 am, at noon, and at 3:00 pm *whatever is right.* Nothing is said of pay for those hired at 5:00 pm. "Whatever is right" in Jesus view of the world is whatever it takes to sustain life. No matter the hours worked, each laborer received enough to feed his family for the day.

The parable does not regard God's graciousness and God's justice as antithetical. We protest: either God cannot be gracious because the principle of justice forbids it, or God must be gracious to all since the principle of equality dictates it. The parable rejects our either/or and insists on a just God's freedom to be gracious.

How can God be both just and gracious at the same time when the laborers are unequally treated? Many explanations are on offer in the history of interpretation. I will give you one: eternal life is given to all but those who have been faithful from childhood, folk like Samuel, will receive bigger mansions than those who, like the thief on the cross, turn to faith in the last possible moment. We prefer interpretations that sabotage the parable to living with perplexity.

We might be well advised to go with the Psalmists who declares *God's greatness cannot be fathomed* (Psalm 145:3). But it is the very notion of God's greatness and goodness that is being called into question by those who start work at 6:00 am.

In *The Book of Common Prayer* we hear *O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom*. How can Samuel, who knows God from boyhood, who serves God in perfect freedom from a very young age, be envious of the thief who has been enslaved to destructive passions all this life? I rather think it more likely the thief would be envious of Samuel.

*The kingdom of heaven is like . . .* Remember, this is a parable about what life is like in the realm of God's rule, not an economic recovery act. If you have known the mercy of God from the dawn of your life, how can you be envious of others who know the mercy of God only late in life?