

Sermon: Pentecost 16

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 24, 2017

Year A

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalm 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

You'll remember that God told Jonah to go to Nineveh... to pronounce God's judgement on that city... to cry out against it... but Jonah headed the other way... to Tarshish... to get as far away as he thought he could... he didn't want to go to Nineveh any more than we might want to go to Baghdad... or Tehran... or Amman... Nineveh was the capital of Assyria... the country responsible for the decimation of Israel and the destruction of the Northern Monarchy... the barbarity of its people was legendary... but still... God was ready to forgive them... if they repented... but Jonah... sulky... comic Jonah said... *I knew it... I just knew it... you're a God who's full of mercy and compassion... slow to anger... abounding in steadfast love... and gracious to people who I think... don't deserve it... and I'm furious with your radical forgiveness... and with you!*

Wil Gafney... Associate Professor of the Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School writes... *Jonah's geographical context— today's Iraq and Syria — identifies peoples for whom many of us... have felt enmity in recent years... but they are also recipients of God's love... care... grace... and mercy... and of the regime of Saddam Hussein... the Taliban... al Qaeda... ISIS... of them as well... God asks: And should I not be concerned about them and all the people and animals who live in their cities? The answer now is what it was then... Yes, of course... God cares for... reaches out to... accepts... and welcomes those we hold in enmity and those who would harm us...*

God said the people of Nineveh didn't know their right hand from their left... maybe they were *meshugana*... crazy... mixed up... but God wants them too... to repent and return to the Lord... to God's way of being embodied in what would be the life... the words... and the actions of Jesus...

Then Peter said... *Look... we have left everything and followed you... what then will we have?* And Jesus said... *At the renewal of all things... when the Son of Man is seated on the Throne of Glory... you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones... and everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields... for my name's sake... will receive a hundredfold... and will inherit eternal life... but many who are first will be last... and the last will be first...*

It's like what the Zebedee brothers asked... *Jesus... grant one of us to sit at your right hand and one to sit at your left...* but that's zero sum gain thinking... because if I sit there... it means someone else can't... if there's only so much of God's favor to go around... it may mean that I won't be able to get enough... and I want to be sure I get at least... if not more than... enough...

Just a few vv. before today's Gospel... Jesus talks about attachment... and about letting go... he tells the rich young man... who's asked about gaining eternal life... to sell all he has... but the man went away grieving instead because he owned so many things... and just as the rich young man was attached to his possessions... we are attached to passing judgment... but isn't our judgement of others... isn't our evaluation of others... always based on insufficient information... judgement doesn't mean there won't be consequences... but those consequences have nothing to do with God's grace and forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration... for there to not be any consequences... there'd have to be other laws of physics...

But for us to keep the cosmic books... for us to claim to be able to balance the cosmic ledger... for us to pass that kind of judgment with justice... we'd have to know every mind... and every heart... that is and ever was... and every thing that every person has ever done... or not done... and why they did it... or didn't... we'd have to know every fork in every road they ever faced... and why they went this way and not the other... and why they didn't do what they could have done... and why they did what they ought not to have done... and who they forgave and who they didn't... and the grudges they

held... and for how long... and why they let go of them... in other words... we'd have to know... without reservation... the unfathomable laws of karma... and we'd have to understand without hesitation... the incomprehensible laws of physics...

Bp. Satterlee frames it for us this way... the vineyard owner hires everyone for the same daily wage... the rub... as Jesus tells it... is that the owner could have paid the first first... and just sent them on their way... keeping his generosity to those who came last... a secret... but the parable forces the issue by saying the last are paid first... intentionally... so that the first know... that the last are paid the same as they would be...

The Bp. said... what we know... is that from a Lutheran perspective... salvation is not about works... but about God's Grace... and that's both comforting... and can be challenging if you're an able worker... he said that as a pastor... they used to talk about congregational participation... my family's been here for 500 years... my family started this program with a pencil and a legal pad... and now we have 300 students... and I should get more... of whatever more is at the time... but "No!" he said... the newcomer... someone who is new to the faith... someone who is differently-abled... or blind as he is... or walks with a limp... or is in a wheelchair... or has trouble hearing... or has less money than they used to... everyone gets the same as everyone else...

Now as bishop... he said... this may also be true of the church... God has plenty of work to do in the world... more than perhaps those who have borne the heat of the sun are willing and able to do... but that doesn't reduce the amount of work... God has plenty of work to do... and God will find more laborers... the scary part is... the Bp. said... if church isn't about doing the work that God has... God will find someone else to do it...

And the Bp.'s reflection raises other questions... what do we do... when we know that those who come after us... either in the church... or our workplaces... or maybe our

families... what do we do when those who come after us... may do less work than we do... do we still put in a full day's work... give it our best effort... our best shot... and do we do it without resentment... or do we figure that if those who come after us are getting the same day's wage... the same amount of grace... the same amount of forgiveness... the same amount of love... do we take an extra break or two during the day... maybe come in a little late or leave a little early... after all... no one will notice...

We are attached to the work we do... like the rich young man was attached to his possessions... and like Jonah was... to his condemnation of Nineveh... but Jesus wants us to let go... of attachment... and of judgement... it's like when those Buddhist monks create one of those painfully intricate and wildly colorful sand mandalas... and then almost as soon as it's completed... someone comes and sweeps it away... so how can we move from Jonah's perspective... to that of the vineyard owner... how can we let go of works righteousness... not only regarding our salvation... but in our daily lives here and now... and be glad that the vineyard owner gives everyone the same... or does our dislike of God's radical grace... contribute to some kind of distrust of God... I mean... how can we trust someone... who's willing to give more grace... than we are...

Mike+