

16th Sunday after Pentecost September 20 ,2020

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

Context is always important. Right before this parable Jesus encounters the Rich Young Man who asks him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asks him about keeping the commandments and the young man says, “Yep, kept them all!” “Great!” Jesus says, “Now go and sell all you own, give the money to the poor and follow me.”

The man goes away in great distress and Jesus and the disciples have a conversation about the challenge of giving up our comfort to follow Jesus. Peter comes along and (trying to be better than young Mr. Money Bags) brags on the fact that the disciples have left everything for Jesus. Jesus gently rebukes Peter by reminding him that the reward is for all who follow him and a caution, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Then, we get this parable which, funnily enough, has that same caution at the end of it.

Do you feel any sympathy for the workers in the vineyard who had labored all day in the hot sun and received exactly what was given to those who only labored one hour? It’s easy to, isn’t it? Because it goes against what the world has taught us about how work- works. You get paid for the labor you give and that’s it. This is not fair, to our way of thinking. But, it’s how the kingdom of heaven works.

Do you feel sympathy for Jonah in his frustration at God for showing mercy to the despised and feared enemies of the Israelites? If you want to get a sense of the

visceral reaction of Jonah, imagine the Ninevites as being ISIS or Al Qaeda. That's why Jonah doesn't want to go. He doesn't want God to save the Ninevites, he wants God to destroy the Ninevites because of what they have done to Jonah and the Israelites. Because they deserve it!

But God sees things differently in each case.

God offers mercy- the withholding of punishment or harm to the Ninevites, The Kingdom of heaven is the grace (an unearned, unexpected gift) of a day's wage given to those workers who labored only an hour.

We have here two stories of followers of God who get angry over the fact that God is gracious, is merciful towards those who, they deem, do not deserve it. Are too sinful, have not earned it.

While understandable and human, the basic problem in that way of thinking is the same one we had last week in the parable of the unforgiving servant. It assumes that the mercy and grace God needs to extend to us is LESS than that which God needs to extend to others. We cannot see the vastness of our own sin.

I read an article in *Christianity Today* by Tish Warren, an Anglican Priest in which she argued that, "The failure of white Christians on the Left and the Right to grapple with the sin of racism is rooted in our broader failure to understand the profundity and complexity of human depravity. We fail to acknowledge our depth of sin, so we fail to see the dizzying heights of grace."

And because of that failure to accept the depth of our own sin, I would say, we get angry when we see dizzying grace given to others. Pastor Warren goes on to

give a very well-constructed definition of sin as it relates to racism in the United States, I would commend the article to you.

But for our conversation, I think she hits the nail on the head. Part of what is going on here for Jonah and for the disciples represented by those grumbling workers in the vineyard, is that they have a fundamental mis-understanding about the reality of their own sin in relationship to those they envy or despise.

Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount has tried to help us to see. You think your sin ain't so bad? Have you thought about shooting that jerk who just cut you off? Guess what, you killed him and are liable to the same punishment as if you actually did it. Every day, we commit sins of omission and commission that deserve to be punished. That breach our relationship with God and each other. Every day we think about doing things that harm or kill others. Every day, in ways big and small we deny our own belief that God is who we owe ultimate allegiance to. And still, despite this direct and indirect rejection of God...God loves us, and still God forgives us.

As a friend of mine used to say, De Nile ain't just a river in Egypt. It is hard to admit our own bondage to sin. Our own need for grace and mercy. It's easier to believe that we're okay- it's everybody else whose messed up. Or, to think we're not so bad. Not only do we deceive ourselves, but we also miss the wonder of God's amazing grace.

Our hymn of the day reminds us that what is so amazing about God is the wideness of God's mercy. The scope of God's mercy is big enough to include those who have done even the vilest things against God and God's people, as the Ninevites did. And yet, God still yearns for their salvation. Can we put ourselves

in the place of the Ninevites and give thanks to God that God is merciful like that? God's justice is kind- seeking always restoration and not retribution. God welcomes even the sinner with mercy, healing, and grace. We see this lived out in the life of Jesus God's own Son and God's greatest self-expression to us as human beings, as beloved.

Like we spoke of last week, God's mercy, forgiveness, and grace is limitless, enough, our hymn says, for thousands of (not people) but worlds! Can you imagine the vastness of God's mercy and grace for everyone on thousands of worlds? Can you imagine a forgiveness that is not just 7 times but 700 times 7 times and more! Even for that sin that you just can't shake. That grips you day in and day out.

God's love is broader than the measures of our mind. (Thanks be to God). The scope of God's love encompasses more than we can imagine because we are constantly trying to bound it based on our criteria- they don't deserve that! I've worked harder! I've been more faithful! Why do we do this? Why aren't we just happy that another human being has experienced the same kind of forgiving grace we have? It's not like God's grace, mercy, and love will run out!

God's heart is wonderfully kind and we try to narrow it with false limits of our own. We magnify its strictness with a zeal that is ours, not God's. This is why I'm always leery of anything that bounds or limits God's love and forgiveness- because I am always wondering if that is my boundary or God's. While there are bounds for how we live- ones God, like any parent, places around us to protect us. To help us live our best lives. Scripture proclaims time and again, there is no boundary or limit to God's love for us, God's grace for us, God's mercy for us.

I pray, O God that you would open our eyes to see clearly the log in our own eye- the depth of our own sin. I pray this so that we might truly experience the dizzying heights of grace that led you to love us, forgive us, claim us! What a gift that would be! To see, even for a moment, what that love costs.

We are like children, complaining that it's not the right cereal, or the clothes aren't the right brand... blind to our mother's love and sacrifice. Blind to the fact that her clothes are getting worn, that she never seems to sit down and eat a full plate, that she works all day at a job and then from home while we sleep. What a gift it would be for that child to see and know the depth of her mother's love!

I pray, O God, that you would open our eyes to see what this meal of the bread and wine- body and blood of Jesus Christ that we experience as tasteless wafers and tangy wine – to see what it truly cost you. What it means as we eat to our salvation, our forgiveness of sin, our strengthening in faith.

I pray that you would take from us the envy, the jealousy, which binds our hearts when your mercy and grace are offered to others. I pray that we would instead rejoice! That we would strive every day to proclaim with abandon through how we live as well as our voice, the great love God has for each and every one of us. To proclaim that love to even our enemies in the hope that they might hear and repent.

The good news of God, our hope, lies in the very thing that drives us nuts. That God's love and mercy is wide, encompassing all people, and that it is without limit- offered to us again, and again, and again. May you see that boundless love God has for you.