

## **16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost September 24 2017**

### **Jonah 3:10--4:11; Matthew 20:1-16**

Whenever we meet someone who has traveled someplace we have not, the first thing we do is ask the question, "What was it like?"

For the Big Island of Hawaii, where Karen and I were lucky enough to travel for our tenth wedding anniversary, it was a place of contrasts. Vast vistas like a savannah, low fields of grass and few trees. Wide blue skies and equally blue water. And, on the same island, lush green jungles, a canopy that smothers all light, a view that ends a few feet away in the vast diversity of life. A place unlike most others in the US.

Jesus says that this parable of the landowner describes something about the reign of heaven. About the rules by which God operates God's world. I would also say the story of Jonah and Nineveh also says something similar about the reign of heaven. So, what might they be telling us? What kind of world does it describe?

It is a place where everyone gets their daily bread. Gets enough to eat for them and their families. Regardless of their "labor". Does that sound familiar? We pray it every week, "Give us this day our daily bread". It's the story of God providing manna in the wilderness to the Israelites. Enough for the family each day. Remember what happened if you tried to keep some extra? It rotted and became wormy.

This is first article of the Creed stuff. God is the one who created all that exists and God is the one who provides us exactly what we need for each day. Because from God's creation. Exactly enough. No more, no less. All without regard for

whether we have “earned it”. But because God knows we need daily bread to live.

It is a place where even the most wicked nation on earth- Nineveh (think ISIS at their worst, or perhaps North Korea)- is shown mercy and grace when they repent of their ways. Everyone is offered the same thing.

What a wonderfully gracious God! Yet, how do we react to these stories? Do we not feel some sympathy for the prophet Jonah? Watching those who have caused so much pain and suffering for his nation receive God’s mercy. For those who have sweated through the 100-degree heat of the day and who complain about those who have worked less or not at all and gotten paid the same. Who cry, “It’s not fair!”

There are a few things at play here. First is the problem of comparing. Those who worked the full day were given what had been promised- enough for the day. What they needed and expected. It is only in comparison to others that their “enough” becomes “less than”. Parents, I’m sure you’ve experienced this phenomenon. You divide the piece of cake between your two children, and everything is going along just fine until the one looks up and sees what is being offered to their sibling and complains, “Theirs is bigger!” A beautifully moist and delicious piece of cake has been ruined by comparison. Because they got a millimeter more than me.

For us it might be our love of our house, until we see the one our friends just bought. We’re happy with our phones, until we take a look at the new iPhone 15. We’re happy with our clothes until we see the fashion sported by a neighbor. Then these wonderful things we have turn to dust.

Another problem is that our sense of fair doesn't match up with God's sense of fairness.

God's desire is that all those created in God's image should have daily bread. Go back to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, where Jesus first lays down the parameters for how God works. God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the righteous and the wicked. To paraphrase the movie *Dave*, fairness to God is that it's Monday and everybody eats. And they eat not because of what they have done, but because God knows they are hungry. And God desires life for people.

But we are so caught in our American mythos of rugged individualism. Of only getting what you earn and everything else is charity which in some way is shameful. Our imagination is so in bondage we cannot even imagine anything else. It's not fair! They got enough to eat for the day and didn't work for it! Why did you give it to them? God's reply is because they are hungry and need it.

Jonah at least knows why God is merciful to the Ninevites, "I knew it!" he cries. "I knew you were going to be merciful to them because that's who you are and what you do!" And our gut kind of agrees, doesn't it? Why should these horrible people over here gain access to your mercy God when I've been following you all along? That isn't fair!

But do we really want fair? Do we really want to get what we deserve? Because in God's justice, we don't deserve it either.

Like last week, these examples of God's mercy and grace should re-orient us to what God has done for us. To see anew how much God has given us that we

don't deserve. That we have in no way earned. In fact, we don't/can't earn it at all. That's the definition of grace.

The point made in both Jonah and the parable is that all that exists belongs to God. God is the one who created it and shaped it. Who made the laws of physics and spun the universe into motion. And so, God can do what God wants with it.

Why should we get ourselves worked up over what God desires to do with what belongs to God? It's not ours, it belongs to God. Why is it a problem for us that God chooses to make sure that everyone has bread and has access to mercy and grace? When you stop and think about it, shouldn't we be happy that God is like that? That God loves God's creation so much God will feed us just because we are hungry? God will forgive us, even when we have done awful things. That there is nothing we can do to sever the relationship God has with us as one created in God's image.

Why is it so hard to shift to being thankful? To stop comparing and celebrate that God has provided food for everyone! To stop complaining and give thanks that yet one more city has recognized the error of their ways and follows God's way.

Can we put on the lens of God in Jesus and see the world as God does? To recognize the beauty and dignity of all people.

Last week, I invited us to enter God's imagination and picture a world based on forgiveness of others. Instead of bearing grudges, moving beyond our desire for revenge. This week, I invite us to expand our imagination again. To begin to see more clearly this picture of the reign of God that we pray each week would come

to earth. A reign we have committed ourselves to being an outpost of in the world.

A place where our value in the world is not in what we do, but who we are. Where everyone deserves daily bread, forgiveness and mercy, just because they are human, created in the image of God. A world built on abundance. Where we understand that God's creation has provided enough and more than enough for all. A world where we celebrate when another sinner repents. Where we celebrate because everyone can eat for the day. Where we know we and our family will never hunger because in God's reign, no one gets left behind.

Doesn't that sound wonderful?

This is the world we gather each week to practice among ourselves as we confess and forgive. As we sit at the feet of Jesus and have drawn anew in our imaginations the vision of this world. Where we trust in God's promise of enough through our giving to the mission and ministry of this place. Where we receive the tangible reminder of God's grace and mercy in this Meal of Christ's own body and blood. Then we go and live in the world as if God's reign were already present. Planting seeds of the kingdom, yeast in the dough of the world. And wait to see what the Holy Spirit will do with it.

This parable and Jonah reminds us that the world and everything that grows in it is God's, so God's way of doing things will prevail. And for that I say, thanks be to God!