

16 Pentecost, Proper 20, Yr. A

September 24, 2017

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

This morning's collect reminds us of the distinction between earthly things, which are passing away, and heavenly things, to which we should hold fast. That contrast, between how the world looks at things, and what it values, and how God looks at things and what God values, is starkly laid out in the Jonah reading and again in Matthew. In both of those readings, God acts in a way that's contrary to human understanding by being unfailingly and incredibly generous; in both those readings, the human response is resentment; and both readings end with basically the same question – about whether we're envious because of God's generosity.

We probably all know the back story of Jonah. You may remember that God sent him to the Ninevites – the Assyrians, who were hostile to Israel to warn them to repent. Jonah doesn't want to go because he suspects that, if they do repent, God, being God, will do the unthinkable and forgive them. So he resists God's call to him. Sunday school lessons on this are pretty colorful. They show Jonah trying to escape by sailing on a ship that's going in the opposite direction, being thrown overboard when the ship's in danger of capsizing, and ending up in the belly of the whale. And even more interesting, probably especially to young boys, is the picture of Jonah being vomited out of the whale up on to the shore. After that, Jonah, undoubtedly grumbling the whole way, makes his way to Nineveh, proclaims the mandatory message - probably the shortest prophetic message ever : "ONLY FORTY DAYS MORE AND NINEVEH SHALL BE OVERTHROWN!" He then leaves and sets up camp outside the city to see what's going to happen. Much to his dismay, the entire city repents and is saved. That's where we come in. Jonah is angry: "See? This is why I didn't want to come! I knew you were a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love! I knew you would be ready to relent from punishing! And I don't like it one little bit! For my part, I'd prefer that you rain fire and brimstone on them!" At the very least Jonah is betraying a certain ungenerosity of spirit in this story, completely ignoring all the mercy he himself had received: when he defied God and ran the other way; when he was rescued from the sea and then from the whale, when God gave him the shade of the bush, when God explained himself to Jonah – none of it was any good and by the end of the book, we still don't know if Jonah relented. It's a bit like the elder son in the story of the prodigal son. Remember him? He was so incensed that his father forgave his younger brother, so angry at his father's generosity, that he refused to come in and join the party and we're left in the dark there, too, as to whether he even relented and joined in, or stayed outside nursing his grievances, unable to rejoice at another's good fortune.

The Matthew reading makes God's question about his generosity explicit. ARE YOU ENVOUS BECAUSE I AM GENEROUS? I suspect that the almost universal response to this parable in which everyone is paid the same regardless of how long they worked and to the question is a loud: YES! YES, I AM ENVOUS BECAUSE YOU'RE BEING GENEROUS; the whole thing isn't fair! Robert Capon in his book about the parables says that when the paychecks were passed out, the landowner's actions "went down like Gatorade for the last bunch hired, like dishwasher for the next-to-the-last, like vinegar for the almost-first and like hot sulfuric acid for those hired first. If challenged by our response to God's generosity, we could point to the

Protestant work ethic and to the wisdom of the world which says there's no free lunch and that we shouldn't encourage free-loaders or ne'er-do-wells. I remember when we were growing up, my sister and I shared a bedroom and we also shared a portable phonograph. She had a record set about Aesop's fable of "The Grasshopper and the Ants." It's about a grasshopper who plays away the entire summer, completely disregarding the busy scurrying of the ants as they prepared for winter and who, when winter arrives, turns up hungry and freezing, with the appropriate abject apologies and who listens respectfully to the moral chiding of those ants as they do their duty by him, probably grudgingly.

That's more the way of the world, isn't it? The world tells us that competition is a fact of life, that everything is scarce and measured and doled out according to merit. That we need to be careful not to be taken advantage of by those less intelligent or less industrious than we.

I think we can better understand this parable if we look at where it falls in Matthew's gospel. Just before this story, the rich young man walks away from Jesus because he can't give up his riches and the privileges they give him. Peter follows that up by saying, HEY, WHAT ABOUT US? WE'VE GIVEN UP EVERYTHING! What are we going to get out of this? And then this story about the workers is followed by the mother of James and John asking for favored seats in Jesus' kingdom. So, part of this discussion is a warning about the first being last – perhaps we could phrase it as being careful about where you see yourself in the line – or even misjudging what the line is about. Barbara Brown Taylor talks about being careful that you don't spend your whole life climbing the ladder of success only to reach the top to find that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. Because Jesus is interested in moving his disciples from assessing everything from that point of view of the world – about who's worthy and deserving – to a vision of the Kingdom, the world as God intends it to be and toward which we're heading. Maybe one good way of thinking about this is that while we humans are tempted to draw lines – not only who's in and who's out, but who is in what position in the line – while God's in the business of drawing circles, wider and wider circles, including more and more people until, finally, the whole creation recognizes that it exists encircled by God's love.

But how hard this is for us! Someone has said that little kids learn some things early: like, no matter how hard you try, you can't baptize cats; or when your mother is mad at your father, you shouldn't let her brush your hair; or you can't trust dogs to watch your food; or when you're sad, the best place to be is in your grandmother's lap. But little kids learn other things early too – about competing and about favoritism, and about how things and people line up and where they are in that line. In other words, they learn the ways of the world. But mirroring our collect, Isaiah has told us that God's ways aren't our ways. That's what Jesus is telling us in this parable. That God calculates differently than we do – or perhaps that God doesn't calculate at all, but simply loves.

I recently read a book titled *Strangers in Their Own Land*. The book is the result of five years of conversations between a Berkley professor and residents of Louisiana. She went there, she said, because she found that she was struggling with what she called an "empathy wall" between herself and people on the far right – she wanted to understand them so she could break that wall down. At the end of the book, she comes up with a metaphor that encapsulated

the world view of those she's met – and, in accord with today's scriptures, it's the metaphor of a line. These people feel like they've been standing in line, waiting for the American dream, for a long time and that others are cutting in front of them – women, minorities, immigrants - and what they feel is resentment. In our current zero-sum world, a world of scarcity, the line is the defining image. But in God's vision, in the Kingdom's vision, a world of abundance, it's not the line, but the circle that's the defining image.

The parable is, I think, not so much about economic considerations and systems, as an invitation to look at how our current arrangements are moving us toward that kingdom vision (or not) and about how we see and treat our fellow human beings. The world encourages us to see them as competitors, but. God's view is that we are all brothers and sisters, each receiving whatever we need on that journey back to God. The question isn't so much what's deserved as what's needed for each of us to grow into the human beings God created us to be. As we work toward that, as we work toward putting on the mind of Christ, we're called to break out of that "line" thinking, to get past the temptation to judge whether others are deserving of what they have received and, instead, to recognize that we've received grace upon grace and blessing upon blessing and that our response needs to be one of gratitude and generosity. Those will never pass away. Amen.