

16th Sunday After Pentecost Reflection

Pr. Nicole Hanson-Lynn September 19-20, 2020

God's Work, Our Hands Sunday

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Psalms 145:1-8

Philippians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

It's hard to even know where to begin this week. It's a great test of who's paying attention, because we have some readings that are pretty offensive this week. Our Old Testament starts with the book of Jonah, a book that may have been written just to offend the comfortable in Israel.

The book starts with God commanding the prophet Jonah to bring the message of judgement to the people of Nineveh. For a little bit of background, Jonah's name in Hebrew is the same nickname that many of the prophets had for the people of the northern tribes of Israel, "dove." And Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, the nation that conquered and destroyed and dispersed the people of the northern tribes of Israel. Jonah flees, the boat he is on is overcome with a big storm, the sailors all miraculously convert to belief in the Lord, Jonah is thrown overboard and spends three days in the belly of a big fish, and finally consents to his mission to Nineveh. When he arrives at the big city of Nineveh, so large that it is a three days' walk from one side to the other, he tiptoes in one day's walk, delivers the shortest sermon I am aware of: "In forty days, Nineveh shall be overthrown!" and walks back out to await the city's destruction. He is displeased when his tiny sermon becomes the only instance recorded in the Old Testament of a prophet's words resulting in mass repentance, and he throws a big temper tantrum about God's mercy. He is *angry* that God is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. One pastor commented that every time the book of Jonah was read in church, someone would ask him if Jonah *really* survived three days in the fish's belly. The pastor always said he replied, "That's the most believable part of the whole thing!" The book shows incredible mercy, but instead of that being a great, happy ending, a story of repentance and redemption, we are left in the crossroads. Jonah was furious that God's mercy proved to be bigger than Jonah's hatred toward the Assyrians. The scribe for the story of Jonah does not tell us how Jonah replied to God's questions about God's mercy, but I think leaves the question to us: how do we feel when God forgives *our* enemies? When God does not smite those we think are wicked? When God's answer to our prayer is *not* to give us anything we want?

The parable Jesus tells shows me that the book of Jonah did not settle this question in the world. Isn't it such an unfair parable? Those who had worked all day get the same

pay as those who show up at the eleventh hour. And as much as we want to explain away *why* there were people waiting in the market square at 5pm, as much as we want to find a way to *make* it fair, Jesus doesn't tell us. Jesus doesn't tell us if these are people who came late and are passing the blame onto someone else, or if these are people who have been waiting all day, but don't look like the best candidate for the heavy labor that working in the vineyard would entail. Jesus seems quite uninterested in why they are still waiting. What is important is that they have not been hired, and the vineyard owner pays them enough. The amount paid, a denarius, would have at that point been just enough for one days' food and lodging for a family. It was quite literally daily bread, and it is given to all, to those who were called to work at 8 in the morning and those who were called to work at 5pm. In our world that is so concerned with transactional value, this parable is inherently unfair, and yet that is what Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like.

For me, both of these readings bring up the question of *why* we believe. *Why* are we faithful. Because for Jonah and for the laborers who have been working all day in the parable, it doesn't seem like it's got a whole lot of tangible value. Jesus tells this parable when he is less than one chapter away from Palm Sunday. Martin Luther tells us that if we are looking to worship God in order to benefit ourselves, we're barking up the wrong tree. Because salvation *is* inherently unfair. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, 6:23, that "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life." The wages of sin is death. What I deserve, what I have earned, is death. It is only by the grace of God, by the inexplicable, *unfair* generosity of God that I am given new life.

The good news, sisters and brothers, is that we have been given this gift. Our sinful selves try to reject it, to be able to earn salvation, to be in control of our salvation, to be able to decide another is not worthy. But it is wholly gift. It is wholly a gift of God when we need it the most. These texts call us to examine ourselves. What is our response to the generosity of God for us? And what is our response to God's generosity to our neighbors? Let us pray to have hearts open to gratitude for God's grace in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors.

Announcements

Thank you to everyone continuing their financial support. Your stewardship and discipleship are faithful witnesses in this time.

We still are offering Bible studies with video conferencing and phone options. If you are interested in joining, please call either Salem (906) 932-1510 or Zion (906) 932-1320.

We will be making a Salem and Zion Advent devotional, with a reflection each day from members of the congregation. If you are interested in more information about how you can participate in writing a reflection or if you are interested in receiving the completed devotional, call our offices or contact Pr. Nicole with any questions!

Peace be with you.