

Jonah 3:10- 4:11

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort, so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?”

Matthew 20:1-16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around, and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about

five o'clock came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (693)

Jonah had been sent to Nineveh.

He hadn't wanted to go.

God had sent him to tell the Ninevites that their evil ways had come before God, had risen to such a degree that it would be their destruction. God meant for Jonah to go and warn them that living so wickedly would be their destruction.

We might wonder what it was the Ninevites were doing that was so very wicked. Maybe some among them were hoarding wealth, creating economic inequality that could only lead to social calamity. Maybe as a whole city they were bringing destruction on neighboring cities simply as a show of superior strength. Maybe they were despoiling their environment and making the poorest among them suffer that.

The moral universe of such books of the Bible: we might think of it all as so much pearl-clutching, concerning the things taught as wrong in Sunday School circa 1963. Our moral universe now is so much more sophisticated than that, we might think. We bring to our weighing of right and wrong a complexity of understanding that might make the whole line of question seem silly. Those Focusing on Family can concern themselves with this, we might think. Those of the (not so) Moral (not so) Majority can take to the streets about so-called "evil ways," we might think.

Or we might have once thought. We might once have thought speaking in terms of wickedness was a little below us, was more the purview of less cosmopolitan types.

I realize now I miss those days, when evil ways were the concern of televangelists in leisure suits and I could roll my eyes at it all.

These days, wickedness seems on parade, reveling at Venetian weddings or at Davos or in bunkers us peasants can only but imagine, all built to survive the very calamities those outfitting them are bringing about.

Jonah had been sent to Nineveh, that great city, a city so enormous it's a three-day journey across. He'd been sent to warn the Ninevites that if they didn't turn from their evil ways, they would face calamity.

And notice please that the calamity to come isn't clearly to come from God. The story plays it both ways on that question, whether the coming calamity was a natural consequence of evil ways or was punishment from a jealous God, one who jealously wanted the people to do what's right. Early in the story, the coming calamity is presented as a natural consequence, but later in the story, as we just heard, God is understood as its source, a thing God "had said he would bring upon them," though "he did not do it...[which] was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry."

So, the story isn't too concerned with how evil gets met with calamity, and the story isn't too concerned with exactly what the evil ways were, making the central concern something else: what Jonah would do about it all, what Jonah would do with the fact that, though the Ninevites had spent time—perhaps quite a lot of time—being evil and therefore deserving calamity, even punishing calamity, the God who called Jonah to go with a word of dire warning was a God slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love. Indeed, Jonah even explained at the end of the story, when all Nineveh had repented and the city was spared, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."

Because shouldn't the people of Nineveh suffer some calamity at least? Shouldn't the Ninevites suffer calamity commensurate at least with how wicked they'd been?

These measured out measures are the problem Jesus' parable aims to tease out.

It's not a parable that's tough to understand, though it might be one that's tough to get with. The laborers who worked all day will receive the same pay as the ones hired late to labor but for an hour.

Which isn't fair. In the world in which we live, it's not fair.

But in the world the parable means to prepare us for—that is, the kingdom of God—the thing of value isn't money. It is rather the kingdom of heaven. And, see, money functions in terms of amount, which is to say you can have less money and still have it be money. But the kingdom of heaven isn't a matter of degree, it is an absolute. It's a holistic thing. Half of heaven isn't heaven. Indeed, to think "half of heaven" doesn't make any sense. When we find ourselves in its midst at the promised end, heaven won't be doled out in degree, given in amounts commensurate to each one's worthiness, it is a matter of all or nothing, and it's a realm, an encompassing, wherein all creation shall meet with consummation, a wrapping in the old creation to something new.

Consider, other ways of imagining the kingdom of heaven, or if you prefer the reign of God, one being salvation, a word whose root is *salus* which is Latin for health or wholeness, a thing complete. This suggests that salvation is itself a matter of wholeness or completeness, a perfecting of each and all. This suggests that salvation is universal, an end that, if is for any, is for all—for anything less than all isn't salvation.

When I first began in ministry, a longtime member of the church I was serving wondered about whether I thought her grown daughters would get to heaven. They weren't church-goers, though they'd been brought up to be. This sweet worry: of it I wondered how the realm of God could be whole if it didn't include those whom this woman loved—for that would be partial, which would make it not heaven. How would heaven be heaven for her if what she loved most in the world wasn't brought into this other realm with her, for that would be incomplete, this realm that is though complete perfection? How could heaven be whole if it didn't wrap into all that are loved and all that might be loved?

Just so the kingdom of heaven as per this parable: it can't be doled in degree, it can only be encountered as an entirety, can only be the realm in which all find their perfect end, an end appealing, encompassing, a consummation of the all in all.

Which I imagine is a theological idea that we here don't have much problem with, that might even come with some relief. That your pastor is a universalist, isn't imagining God's eternal realm as a place where your daughters couldn't possibly be admitted, a sort of Ivy League of the sky: this perhaps comes as a relief. Indeed, the wholeness of heaven is, I imagine, a Christian promise we here wouldn't object to, not like the longest to labor did, not indeed like Jonah is storied to have done, so objecting to a gracious God that he'd run in

the opposite direction, that he'd throw himself into a violent sea, fully preferring to die than to accept that God would be merciful and more than happy to relent from punishment. So, the question for us is less a theological one, is more a matter of Christian practice, more a matter of how to live our convictions in this world, how to bring them to the living of our days.

The rise of the cost of diesel fuel has many farmers taking to the internet.

Diesel is what fuels most big farming. To till, to plant, to spray, to harvest, to transport: these all rely on diesel fuel, these which farmers spend their lives doing, these which the world depends upon them doing, American farms feeding much of the world. And diesel is more expensive now than ever before in American history, rising over \$0.31 gallon in the last week alone, which scaled up to its relevant amount is *a lot* of money. This is hitting farmers, and our food source, hard.

Which follows a few already hard hits. DOGE, with Elon Musk at the helm, the world's richest man, cut SNAP benefits for the poor, mostly children, thus undercutting a major source of income for American farms. ICE menaced the immigrant labor force, which left produce in fields, no one to harvest it, so frightened were the laborers that they were staying home. The tariffs on trade with China had our biggest buyer of soybeans looking elsewhere for their needed product—and finding it, a mammoth trade partner that won't be easy to win back, if at all. And now the cost of fuel. This is crippling many farmers, for some a final blow. And they've taken to TikTok. They're speaking out about the precarity of their situation, which precarity is something we will all eventually feel.

And the response on TikTok has largely been, "Who'd you vote for?"

There is, in fact, a whole subreddit featuring this discourse. "Leopards ate my face," the subreddit is called, playing off the meme that got started early in the first term of the Trump presidency. It comes from a tweet sent in response to people complaining about the new administration and how its reactionary policies, long thought to go after anyone other than "me" and "us," suddenly seemed to be affecting "me" or "us." The tweet said sarcastically, "I never thought leopards would eat MY face," and went on to claim it was quoting a sobbing woman "who voted for the Leopards Eating People's Faces Party." The tweet gained more than 58,000 retweets and 92,000 likes over the next five years and has gone on to internet meme-dom beyond what can be traced.

Thus began the subreddit, which has lately been flooded with short videos or news headlines about farmers' collective plight and lament, while a weary world wonders back, "Who'd you vote for?"

Which then spurs accusations that liberals are being smug, their usual smug selves, if not being downright cruel. A fourth-generation farming family is going to lose their livelihood and legacy, and all you libs can think to respond is, "Who'd you vote for?" Really, the calamity that a whole major sector of the American electorate warned about, over and over again, voices of warning sounding out from the loftiest posts at media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Rachel Maddow Show* to the lowliest social media accounts with just a few hundred followers, people saying over and over again, "Don't vote for this cruel clown who doesn't care about anyone but himself," like Jonah sounding forth warning of this coming calamity, has finally come home, and all you can find it in your heart to say is, "Who'd you vote for?"

Like, what do these of "deep red farm country" expect? Grace? Mercy? After so very much government-sponsored grace, mercy?

What world are they living in?

What world are we living in?

And how can we live in this world as if we were also full citizens of the reign of God, already full citizens of the reign of God, with mercy that never runs out, with grace that never becomes exhausted and certainly never curdles into resentment that it's been taken for granted just one too many times?

I don't blame Jonah for heading to Tarshish. Called to Nineveh, he would turn to face the exact opposite direction and head to Tarshish, as far from Nineveh as you can get the world—and I don't blame him.

I imagine I sound like I'm leading you to the right answer. I imagine I sound typical of what we all know we'll hear in church, simple dictates about being good, like I'm asking you a question whose answer I know and I'm leading you to the answer but in such a way that I can imagine myself being more clever than that. I'm asking a question: can you live with the laws of grace and magnanimity that rule amidst the positive-sum reign of God (everyone wins!) but live by them in this world, which is zero-sum (some winners and therefore some losers), where there's really only so much to go around so we have to dole

things out as they are deemed deserved to be used wisely in accordance with their value? Can you please do that? Because I think you should and because I, as an ordained Christian, think I can perhaps most of all.

But I don't know if I can.

So much damage has been done. These many years of Donald Trump being at the center of our political life, at the center of our national self-understanding and our international relating; this man who is injured and injuring, a bully and serial abuser of any he'd regard as weak, though also entertaining and even funny, if for being shocking and veering way off the typical script: so much damage has been done.

And I don't know how we recover from it. I don't know: do we do what President Ford thought wise, and pardon the past president, or was that simply to displace the social wound of the Nixon era from one party to another? Do we do what reconstructionists did following the Civil War, trying to give modest wins to the Confederacy so to remove the poisonous sting of their defeat? Do we indeed as if build statues of slavers in the town square to make those defeated and resentful feel better, help them recast their cause as noble? Or is all that to lay the social wound back on the already wounded, the once-enslaved, these whose resentments weren't as frightening as those willing to terrorize, those willing to lynch—all of which is well argued to have but forestalled the actual, and difficult work, of reconciliation?

I don't know.

Jack, our younger son, is strong willed and also strongly opinionated about food. Some of our greatest battles were around what he would eat, even from his very earliest days.

And this is someone I fiercely love, mind you. He's lively and smart and funny and lovely. And we're similar in many ways, he and I. There's a certain ferocity we have in common.

One day when he was very young, still someone who'd eat in a high chair, he was enjoying his mash while I partook of a rare treat I'd bought myself, sushi from Guido's—which caught Jack's eye. A fan of avocado, Jack noticed more specifically the little blossom of wasabi. And he leaned toward it, reached for it, jabbered for it, "Cado! Cado!" while I cautioned, "No."

His request became more demand as I more clearly, while also patiently, said, “No, this isn’t avocado.”

Now, Jack also wasn’t much of a sleeper for his first several years. So Jess and I were tired from 2006-2009 or so. As such, I wasn’t always the most magnanimous “guiding good choices” sort of mom, I was often more the “you get what you get and you don’t get upset” sort of mom.

But I really loved this kid. Really, I did—and do.

But, boy, could he make me find my limit.

Yelling now, he still couldn’t reach the wasabi—until I slid the little plastic tray closer to him.

It wasn’t avocado, as I said. I told you as much.

I don’t know what to do about painful consequences finally coming home to people long suspended by webs of protection that yet went unnoticed, until they were gone. I don’t know how best to rebuild a society that can have grace on offer, can practice mercy as benefits all.

I don’t know. But I suppose having that as an aim is a good start.

Bless this moment as that start.

Thanks be to God.