

17th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 20A
Sermon 9.24.23

Jonah 3:10, 4:1-11

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 God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. 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 the usual daily wage, 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 the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 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 the usual daily wage? 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.” (697)

I was baptized when I was three months old. So, that means I’ll get more heaven when I die than someone who was baptized when they were older, right? Like, when each of us dies, if I’ve

had, say, seventy years of being a Christian but the other person only had, like, forty years of being a Christian, I'll get, like, sixty percent more heaven than that other person, right? Cuz I've been at this following Christ thing for sixty percent longer, right?

The question Peter had brought to Jesus was along these lines.

This was after Jesus had finished saying these things, when he'd left Galilee and gone to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

There some Pharisees found him and posed a tricky question to him, which had his disciples joining in for clarification.

And while they were doing this, some people started bringing little children to Jesus so he could bless them, which had the disciples deeply objecting, which itself had Jesus deeply objecting. "Let the little children come to me," he told his disciples who were acting as gatekeepers. "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

This piqued someone else's curiosity, a man approaching Jesus to ask what *he* must do to have eternal life. Maybe he figured since he wasn't a child anymore something else would be required of him? This had Jesus explain that he must keep the commandments, which the man assured him he had, so what he also should do, according to Jesus, is sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then follow Jesus on the way.

Which proved more than the man could commit to—for now. The story notes he went away grieving for he had many possessions. But we don't know what decisions he may or may not have made in the future.

What we *do* know is Peter seizing upon this to point out to Jesus of the disciples, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?"

Jesus assured him, "Everyone who has left houses and family and fields for my sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But," would come the twist, "many who are first will be last and the last will be first. For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner..."

And so begins the parable of unfairness we just heard.

You have to enter a parable. You have to try it on, find yourself within it. That's especially the case for this parable when it comes to people like me. People who know the mark the parable is aiming to land on. ("Be gracious! Don't keep such close count!") And people who, frankly, don't really know how laborious labor can be. I've always worked, but I've never really labored, day in and day out, digging, planting, building, climbing and kneeling and lifting and piling. Laboring

such that your body is tired and eventually gets worn out: even just a few years doing it, your back aches, you joints are shot.

My encounters with manual labor have come through Tobias' summers working as a builder. He would come home *tired* each day, and more than a little irritated when someone on the crew hadn't been pulling their weight. He would also tell of when a new laborer joined the crew. There'd be a time of audition, almost, a time for the owner of the company to see whether this new guy worked well with the others or was too lazy or too fussy or too sewing of resentment about who gets paid what and why.

Those laborers who worked all day: they had a point.

I guess I've always been able to relate more to the people standing around, waiting to be chosen, waiting to be hired for some important job that I didn't make the first cut for. I was that kid in gym class, the one no one wanted for first string, not even for kickball. And kickball's pretty easy. No one does it all that well. Those balls are really bouncy.

There's toil in laboring all day. There's humiliation in waiting around to be chosen. Everyone in this parable has it pretty rough.

But life is rough, right? You occupy one place in life, and all those others are foreclosed upon for you. You can't be everything. You can't even be anything, despite what we tell kids these days: "You can be anything you want to be." No, you can only be you, and that can be rough because being you is only good for a few things. You'll be ill-fit for most things in life. But that's okay. That's true of everyone. And we're really not made for *only* what we're good at. We're not made to be creatures of optimization but of love, of grace—offering such things when when we can, receiving of such things when we need, usually both/and.

One place the parable is hobbled in making its point: money is relative and can be doled out in degree. But the kingdom of heaven is absolute, can't be divvied up. It is the all in all, and it isn't available for being less than all.

Because the fact is, laborers in this world would rightly be disgruntled if their pay wasn't linked in *some* way to how hard and well they worked. Indeed, a lot of the labor unrest these days is in response to this *not* being the case. CEOs are paid generally 400 times what their typical wageworker is paid, though it can't sensibly be argued that these CEOs are working more hours or working harder than their employees. When Mike Bloomberg, the billionaire once-mayor of New York City, was asked about his immense wealth, he explained it by saying, "Well, I worked hard." But can he really think he worked *harder* than all of us non-billionaires?

Have you ever shadowed a laborer paid the average hourly wage? And then shadowed them home to watch them try to make it all add up? The time-tax is what it's lately been called—the tax on your time as you try to make life all add up. To apply for financial aid or to file for public housing or to enroll in Mass Health or to register your car after it finally passes inspection after all the repairs you managed to have done after it didn't pass inspection.

Of course, I've never shadowed a household run by a person whose financial position is precarious at best, just as I've never shadowed Mike Bloomberg at work. But I do have an imagination, and I've spent time *imagining* both, and I can imagine both panting hard to outrun the buzzsaw of *laissez faire* capitalism. But I'd venture the guess one got a pretty good head start. The buzzsaw will busy itself with targets easier to catch.

It's not fair. I get it. It's not fair!

This was Jonah's complaint as well.

He'd been called upon to go Nineveh to tell the people there just to stop.

We're not sure what they needed to stop. The story doesn't go into what about them was all wrong. All the story tells us is that the wickedness of the people there had come to the attention of the Lord—as if the point of the story isn't what *does* or *doesn't* please the Lord, but is instead what it feels like when the Lord delivers upon people forgiveness or grace that they don't really seem to deserve.

Which Jonah sort of knew he'd be made to feel. He knew that the punishing consequence for the people's wickedness which the Lord said would come upon wouldn't actually come to them. And Jonah would have been a party to that. Jonah, in prophesying a word of warning, would have made it so the people wouldn't get what they deserved. The Lord would send him with a word of warning. And he would go and speak the word of warning. And the people would heed it and change their ways, making it so all the time they'd already spent being wicked would be wiped away, a clean slate, a new start.

And that's not fair. Because shouldn't they get, maybe, fifty percent of the punishment they were due, given that they'd spent maybe half their lives being wicked and only half their lives being good? Or maybe it was more like 40/60? We can give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it was 30/70. So, they should get at least 30% punishment.

But no. They'd only get grace. They'd only get forgiveness and love, which is what the righteous get, too, those who've only ever been good.

This is why Jonah went Tarshish instead of Nineveh, Tarshish which is in exactly the opposite direction of Nineveh. Nineveh was in the East, and Tarshish was in the northwest, in what is now southern Spain.

But on the way across the Mediterranean, a storm surged and threatened to wreck the ship, which had the crew of the ship do a quick reckoning, asking each on board to pray to their god that the storm might pass and the ship be safe. This had Jonah admit to the crew that he was actually going against his god with this trip—not overland to Nineveh but over sea to Tarshish. So, they threw him overboard to save themselves, at which point a fish grabbed him and swam him back whence he came, throwing him up on the shore, “spewing him,” according to the story.

And don’t worry if you can’t take this story all that seriously. There’s a good, scholarly case often made about the book of Jonah that it’s a comedy, a comedy to bring to light the comic aspects of being a people of God—that we’ll seem fools, that we’ll engage with things far outside our ken. It’s okay to have a laugh at this. Sometimes we learn best when we’re laughing. Sometimes we come able to cope with the absurdities of life—to cope with them with acceptance and good will, with grace and even hope—if we’ve had a laugh at otherwise tragic absurdities.

So, Jonah finally relented, he finally went. And he warned the people, and they changed their ways. So, God changed his mind about the calamity he had said he’d bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. So, he built a little booth in which to be angry, a booth for his tantrum—whereupon God trolled him a little bit. He grew a bush to give him shade, which Jonah liked. But then he sent a worm to kill the bush, which had Jonah hot and uncomfortable once again.

Now Jonah was angrier still—angry enough to want to die.

Which gave God the moment to bring the question. You’re so angry about not getting your way when most of what’s good in your life you had little hand in bringing about? You’re even angry about the bush that you had no hand in growing up. But you expect God not to be concerned about a whole city of people and other creatures whom God did create?

This book is one of but two in the Bible—two out of all sixty-six books—that ends with a question.

It’s a good question. And it’s an evergreen question. Because the fact is we live in this question; the fact is we need both fairness and forgiveness. People need both fairness and forgiveness. In order to live peaceably within ourselves and our households, among neighbors and

nations, we need a sense that things will be fair, the same rules will apply to everyone, and consequence will be doled out according to deed. But we also need forgiveness, we need grace. Because, though everyone is equally valuable in God's sight, equally beloved to God as creator and sustainer, not everyone is equal in the world—and that's going to play out to unfair ends. And somehow, we have to account for that. Somehow, we have to enact forgiveness, enact grace.

Not everyone's the same, in spite of the deepest wishes of technocratic visionaries, from Lenin to Zuckerberg, who seem to think you can build a society as if humans were machines. So, somehow, we have to account for this fact. We have to allow for the eventuality that an 8-hour workday isn't possible for some people, that a forty+ hour work week isn't possible for some people, that such accountability at work makes for chaos at home or exhaustion within. We have to allow for the likelihood that less productive people in terms of wealth-production are contributing in other ways—

or maybe not! Perhaps their contribution is simply in their being, which being is beloved to God even if apparently to no one else. A society that prizes optimized productivity will have to grapple with the fact that not everyone can be productive to the standard of optimization that the mightiest will set.

How are we going to do that?

The problem with this parable is that it sets in the world of zero-sum, where for one person to get one thing, someone else won't get that one thing, the promised realm of the positive sum, where for one person to get one thing, everyone else also gets that one thing. This parable sets in the world where equal pay for unequal work isn't going to sit well the reign of God where there is simply the All that cannot be divided but can only be thrown open and unfurled and made inclusive of all. The problem with this parable is that it imposes onto this world of cause-and-consequence the reign of God, which is the reign of redemption and grace, all in a way that a lot of parables Jesus told don't quite manage to do.

Yes, Jesus told parables in order to evoke what the kingdom of heaven is like.

Yes, the point of the parables is to destabilize the hearer's thinking, to unfix what is otherwise settled in the hearer's mind.

The kingdom of heaven is like what doesn't really have an analogue in the world, yet all we have for our understanding are the things of this world. So, the parables, deliberately puzzling, and indeed more puzzling the longer you sit amidst one, bring that alien nature home to us, that alien

nature that is God's reign and is both our home while also utterly unlike any reign we've actually lived amidst.

Somehow the reign of God will make all this redeemed. Somehow the kingdom of heaven will make all that's transpired amidst history become now full of God's grace.

And this is scandalous assertion because a lot has happened amidst history that seems beyond any power to redeem it.

This is a *scandalous* assertion because a lot of what occurs in *this* world that we *do* know doesn't seem like it's all going to just come out in the wash. Some things are a little too monumental for that. Some things aren't things we can justly "let go." When you were a child and you were so upset by something—you fell off your bike, your best friend couldn't come out to play—one of your grown-ups would offer you a cookie and you'd feel better. But most of history isn't like that. God can't just offer us a cookie and make everything better. It's gonna take a little more than a cookie. It's going to take a lot to make all this right.

That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That. Some understanding. Some faith. Some dawning that makes it all make sense, that makes it all intelligible, that makes it alright.

And I don't know what that could be. I don't know what future God could possibly have in mind that would make the past redeemed and fulfilled. I *do* know I have not infrequently stood beside some gross injustice, found myself close enough to see it in the flesh, and turned my mind to heaven to say, "This had better be good. Whatever you've got in mind, whatever will make this right: it had better be good."

And I do know that I would like to work amidst history to create realms here among us that make redemption a slightly less tall order.

I do know I would like to live amidst the reign starting now—because my faith doesn't make me patient, it makes me impatient. I would like to live as if God's reign were now.

Which is why I come to church. Because here it is.

Join me? Because it wouldn't heaven without you.

Thanks be to God.