

17th Sunday after Pentecost (L25A)
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday was the installation of our new synodical bishop, Greg Busboom in Springfield. It happened in the context of a festival worship service with lots of pastors, deacons, and lay leaders participating, and quite a few bishops from other synods and church bodies as well. It was a grand affair. But in the midst of all the pomp and circumstance was a theme that pervaded the readings, the hymns, and the prayers, and that theme was service. The Gospel reading chosen for the day was Jesus washing the disciples' feet, in which Jesus redefines his relationship with the disciples and challenges their assumptions about how the world is supposed to work. Instead of a top-down, hierarchical model of exercising power, Jesus modeled a relationship of bottom-up service and love. By this choice of theme for the day, Bishop Busboom was clearly indicating that this was his understanding of his role as bishop. The reality is going to be more complicated than that for him, but I think it's a very good thing that at the start of his term as bishop this is the vision of God's kingdom that he will hold before us.

Like Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, all of our readings today challenge our assumptions about our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. What is needed is a change of mind and a change of heart. The biblical word for that is repentance, and it helps to remember that that is one of the first things out of Jesus' mouth in the Gospel of Matthew: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repent! Change your attitude, change your assumptions so that you can change how you deal with one another and with God. God is in the process of taking control of the world, and how God will run the world is not the way we do it.

I'm going to say something about each of our readings and how they can help us to recognize ourselves in them and look for God's help in moving us to repentance and faith. Both the Gospel reading from Matthew and our first reading from Jonah use stories to draw us in and challenge us. Paul's letter operates in a different way, but toward the same goal.

First, Jesus' parable of the landowner. Even young kids can be drawn into this story because they learn about fairness and unfairness early on. And parents and teachers reinforce that learning by rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. So even kids can see how unfair it is of the landowner to pay the workers who only work one hour at the end of the day the same as those who were there from the start of the day and worked all day long. It's no accident, I think, that Jesus tells this parable right after the encounter with the rich young man who could not bring himself to part with his wealth and give it to the poor before following Jesus. This shocks the disciples, and gets Peter to pipe up and remind Jesus that they left everything to follow him. And so Jesus tells this story, and in it he has the landowner push back against the early worker's grumbling, reminding them that they got the pay they agreed to, and so had nothing to complain about. What they were really upset about was his generosity to others. You can feel it, can't you? I sure can. Because maybe this has been your attitude? Maybe you have resented generosity to others when you've had to earn everything you have gotten yourself? Maybe you're resenting it right now? If so, you're getting Jesus' point. And Jesus says to you, "Repent – the kingdom of Heaven is near!"

Before we get to my favorite text in the whole Bible, something needs to be said about Paul's letter to the Philippians. I'm sensing here that Paul is getting tired of being an apostle, that what he really wants to do is to throw in the towel. He's worn out, he's frustrated, and he'd be happy just to die, just like Jonah. But Paul isn't quite the jerk that Jonah is, and he catches himself. He shifts his attitude. He doesn't *really* want to die and go be with Jesus because he knows he's

called to proclaim Jesus here so that people's lives can be changed like *his* own life was changed in *his* encounter with Jesus. But he kind of has to talk himself into it, and he lets the Philippians – and us – in on his internal dialogue. It is the kind of dialogue that I imagine everyone has at some point in their life of faith. The pull to selfish interests is strong, no matter who we are, and so we have to continually remind ourselves of our need for repentance, that shift of focus away from ourselves and toward others.

Finally there is Jonah. Jonah is a parable like Jesus' story of the landowner and the hired workers. But the whole story significantly longer and so has more time to draw you in. The original audience for Jonah was the people of Israel after their return from the Babylonian exile. This was a time when there was much more engagement with the outside world and they were remembering God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that God would bless not just their descendants, but the whole world through them. Jonah is not on board with that sentiment, though, so when God calls him to go and speak against the Assyrian capital Nineveh, he senses something fishy. (That's a little Jonah pun.) If God wants to destroy Nineveh, God should just do that. If God sends a prophet, well God just might have mercy, and Jonah certainly doesn't want that. And so he runs away. That's where the literal fishy part comes, which gets Jonah back to the starting line with a second chance. But even though he now goes and does what God asks, his heart is not in it. He still hates the Ninevites and holds out hope that God will *not* show them any mercy. Because the Assyrians, after all, showed no mercy on Israel when they conquered it. What happens next is absurd, but this is story. It's exaggeration for effect. What happens next is that the people of Nineveh repent. All of them. They put on sackcloth and ashes. Even the cattle! And then *God* repents! That's hidden in our translation, but the old King James says it explicitly: "God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did *it* not." Our translation says that God changed God's mind, but that's just what repentance is. And so Jonah throws a fit. "I knew it! I knew that you were going to do that. That's why I ran away!" And then Jonah quotes one of the most beautiful statements about God in the whole Bible. We have it in our psalm today, and it shows up in a few other places as well. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Only Jonah uses this beautiful statement about God as an accusation *against* God. He hates that God is merciful to the people he hates. Just like the all-day workers in Jesus' parable. Jonah would rather die than live in a world like that. And he cares more about a bush than he cares for a city full of people. This is irony at its finest, and a mirror for you and me to look into. Because God's question for Jonah is really a question for us. Just a few minutes ago I stood up here and pronounced God's mercy and forgiveness on you, and you were happy to hear that message, I presume. But if we are honest, there are people we would rather God *not* show mercy on, people who need to get what's coming to them, what they deserve. Retribution is what we want for those folk, not mercy. And so the cycle continues. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, until everyone is blind and toothless. But here's the good news. *God* would rather die than allow a world like that to continue. And in Jesus, that is just what God does. On the cross Jesus bears the consequences of our hatreds and resentments so that the destructive cycle of sin and death and evil might be broken. In Jesus God has loved you to death so that death might not have the final word. You are loved and forgiven and God is working to make all things new. So will you now be envious of God's generosity to others? Should God *not* be concerned about all the other people in the world in need of God's love and forgiveness? (Even those people you justifiably despise?) Take those questions with you this week. Ponder them in your heart. And let the peace of God, which passes all understanding, open your hearts and minds and keep them in Christ Jesus. Amen.