

17th Sunday after Pentecost (L25A)

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

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

Over the past four weeks there has been a notable progression in our Gospel readings focused on what it means to be the church. As you know, this long green season that we are in now that takes up the second half of the church year, is all about taking the story of Jesus from the first half of the year – his birth, his ministry of teaching and healing, his journey to the cross, and finally his death, resurrection, and ascension – and now fleshing out that story, as it were, in the life of the church born at Pentecost. That progression began with Peter’s divinely inspired recognition of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, which elicited Jesus’ promise that he would build his church on that gift of faith. But then it gets complicated. We first learn that the Messiah is not the conquering hero we want and expect, but a sacrificial victim of human sinfulness and all the powers that oppose God. And then we learn the being the church means sharing Jesus’ self-giving way of life and death. One of the ways that plays out in the life of the church is in forgiveness, being persistent in seeking reconciliation when we inevitably wrong one another. But that can be exhausting, and so we look for practical limits, only to have Jesus challenge our common sense and practicality. Our readings today continue that challenge, testing our sense of fairness and our tolerance for God’s love and mercy when they are shown to others. All of this, the trajectory of these recent weeks, is attempting to work in us a change of mind and a change of heart in our relationship to God and to one another. 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 today and how they can help us to recognize ourselves in them and look for God’s help in moving us to repentance and faith.

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 workers’ grumbling, reminding them that they got the pay they agreed to, and so had nothing to complain about. What they really were 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, and to me, “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 is significantly longer and so has more time to draw us 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 not only that they would become a great nation, but that God would bless the whole world through them. Jonah is on board with the first part, but not the second. So, when God calls him to go and speak against the Assyrian capital Nineveh, he senses something fishy. (That's a little Jonah joke.) If God wants to destroy Nineveh, God should just do that. If God sends a prophet, God might end up having mercy, and Jonah absolutely 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 his own 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 mercy. Because the Assyrians, after all, showed no mercy on Israel when they conquered them. They were unspeakably cruel. So, Jonah has a point. What happens next in the story is absurd, but this is story. It's exaggeration for effect. What happens next is that the people of Nineveh repent. All of them. Even the cattle! And then *God* repents! That's hidden in our translation, but the old King James says it plainly: "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. 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 folks, not mercy. And so the cycle continues. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

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 and hatred 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, so that the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding, might transform your hearts and minds and keep them in Christ Jesus. Amen.