

September 20, 2020
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 25, Year A
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Matthew 20:1-16
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Location, Location, Location

Last Sunday I shared that one of the most frequent questions that I have heard about scripture is the question, “What does it mean to Bless the Lord?” That question came up during last week’s sermon because “Bless the Lord” is a frequent exhortation in last week’s Psalm, Psalm 103.

Our gospel reading this morning also has a “most frequent” distinction. It has the distinction of being the gospel reading that the most people have told me that they do not understand and do not like.

In this gospel reading, there is a landowner who needs workers for his vineyard. So, he goes out early in the morning and hires some people, agreeing with them for the usual daily wage.

They go into the vineyard and start working. Later in the day, nine o’clock in the morning, the landowner goes out and hires more workers, for a “right” payment. He did this three more times, at noon, at three, and at five.

When the work day ended at six, he had his manager pay all of the workers, beginning with those hired last. The manager gave those who had worked one hour the usual daily wage. The implication is that he also gave the usual daily wage to who had worked for three hours and six hours and nine hours.

As the ones who had worked all day saw this they must have started to think, “We’re going to get more, because we did more. We worked all day.” But then they got what they agreed to at the beginning, the usual daily wage.

But what had seemed like fair payment for a day’s work, now made them feel like they were being cheated. They grumbled about what they had agreed to, because they had seen others who had worked less get the same. They said, “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.”

They had lost nothing, they had been given exactly what was promised, but still, they felt that they deserved more. The landowner responded, “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?”

That was the story that Jesus told. And Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like this. Like people who worked for an hour being paid the same as people being paid the same as people who worked all day.

And people say that they don’t like it. They don’t like the kingdom of heaven being like a place, a time, when people were treated unfairly, when people didn’t get what they deserved.

Who was treated unfairly in this story? An argument could be made that everyone was treated unfairly.

Of course, some people, the people who were paid a day’s wage for an hour’s work, were treated unfairly to their benefit, in that they were paid far more than their labor was actually worth. Conversely, an argument could be made and often is made that the people who saw people who had worked

far less than they had worked be paid the same as they were, were treated unfairly to their loss.

If the owner of the vineyard had wanted to pay people based on the work that they had done, then those who had been in the vineyard all day should have been paid more than those who had only been in the vineyard for an hour.

Of course, in the resentment of this parable, we find an assumption is being made that maybe shouldn't be made. The assumption that is being made is that we're the people who have been at work in the vineyard all day long, that we're the people who have earned the full amount.

Those who are uncomfortable with this parable, do not ask themselves, did I start at nine, at midday? Am I one of the ones who started at three o'clock or at five o'clock? No one I've ever heard complain about this story starts from there, from believing that they were one of the people who was paid a day's wage for an hour's work. They always start from the place of believing that they worked the whole day. Even if they had worked the whole day, those who worked the whole day weren't really treated unfairly.

The story would be a very different story if the owner of the vineyard had said to those who started first in the day, "I'm going to have to pay to you less because I decided to hire these people to work only a few hours and I don't have enough to go around," but, of course, that's not what happened. This parable doesn't say, the kingdom of heaven isn't like that, a kingdom of scarcity, where there isn't enough to go around, where some people have to have less so that everyone can have something.

The landowner had plenty, enough to give those who worked the least the same amount as what was fair for those who had worked the most. It

wasn't taken out of the pockets of those who started the day early in the morning.

The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner, who can be generous without counting the cost. So, really, there's no reason to rail against this story, even if you're the person who worked the whole day.

But what if you aren't. What if we are the people who started work at nine or noon or three or five. What if our assumption that we've been in the vineyard the whole time, bringing in the harvest that the landowner wants is a mistaken assumption?

Do we have the same reaction to this story, to hearing that the kingdom of heaven is like people being paid more than their labor was worth, if we stop for a minute and imagine that we were the ones who were hired later, rather than the ones who were working all day?

This story is a story about the grace and generosity of the landowner, who invited people into his vineyard late in the day and who gave everyone the same payment. What if we were to believe that we were the recipients of that grace and generosity?

The landowner asks the question, "Are you angry because I am generous?"

Those who worked all day, who had lost nothing in the transaction between the them and the landowner, and in the transaction between the landowner and the other workers who had started late in the day, were angry. The text says that they grumbled against the landowner.

I have had people tell me that this story makes them angry, because it feels unfair to them.

But if they understood themselves, if we understood ourselves as the recipients of the landowner's generosity I wonder if we would be so angry. I wonder if how we react to this story depends on where we locate ourselves in it. And I wonder what would happen, how we would react to the landowner's generosity, if we located ourselves differently. If we didn't assume that we were the ones who had earned the full daily wage.

Then there's the story of Jonah that is our Old Testament reading for today. What we have as our reading for today is the end of book of Jonah, the story of a reluctant prophet. Just for a very quick recap, story of Jonah is the story of a man who was called by God to go to Nineveh and preach to that city. Chapter one of Jonah says, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah...saying 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'" (Jonah 1:1-2)

But Jonah didn't go, instead the text says that Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord. He tried to escape to a city in the opposite direction from Nineveh. The book of Jonah tells us the Jonah got on a ship to get away from the call of God, but that God sent a storm that threatened the ship. The sailors that Jonah was with did everything that they could to save their ship, but they knew that they were going under. Eventually it became clear that the storm was happening because Jonah was fleeing from the presence of God. Jonah volunteered to be thrown overboard, so that, perhaps, the Lord would let the ship and its sailors survive. Jonah was thrown overboard and the storm ceased. Jonah was saved by drowning by being swallowed by a large fish in whose belly Jonah spent three days and three nights. There, he got some time to think things over and when it was over, God said to him

again, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” (Jonah 3:2)

This time Jonah went to Nineveh and he preached the message that God had given him to preach, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

When he was finished with his “sermon” if you can call it that, the whole city of Nineveh repented, from the king to the animals. This was the proclamation that the king made, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.’ (Jonah 3:7b-9)

That all brings us to today’s Old Testament reading, which tells us that God did change his mind about the destruction that he was going to rain down on Nineveh and Nineveh survived.

And that mercy, that forgiveness on God’s part infuriated Jonah. Our reading says, “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.” (Jonah 4:2-3)

Nineveh was the capital city of the great Assyrian Empire, the empire that was responsible for the destruction of the whole northern kingdom of

Israel. Nineveh then became the capital of the Neo-Babylonian empire. In other words, Nineveh was the city that the enemies of the people of Israel and Judah came from, the source of the armies that had destroyed Jonah's homeland.

It is here that we finally find out why Jonah had run away from God in the first place. He didn't want to go and preach to Nineveh because he was afraid that the Ninevites would listen to his preaching and that they would repent and God would forgive them. He was afraid that God's mercy would be shown to his enemies, which, of course, it was. Once he saw that God had show mercy to those who Jonah hated, he believed that it would be better for him to die rather than live.

And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:5)

That's a familiar question. We heard a similar question in our gospel reading as well. The landowner asked, "Are you angry because I am generous?"

When you hear the story of Jonah, who are you in the story? Are you Jonah, furious because God's forgiveness has been extended to your personal enemies? Or are you someone in Nineveh, who had experienced God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's generosity, God's mercy? Do we imagine ourselves as the people preaching repentance or as the people who need to repent? Do we imagine ourselves as the ones who can give others access to God's grace, like Jonah, who tried to run to the other side of the known world to avoid sharing grace with his enemies, or do we imagine ourselves as people who need to hear that word of grace, spoken over us, over our own lives, over our own cities?

Where we locate ourselves in scripture matters. We can't always assume that we're the workers in God's vineyard all along grudgingly making room for the slackers who, for some reason, God chooses to bless and gift. We can't assume that we're the arbiters of grace, who grudgingly preach about God's forgiveness, in eight-word sermons that are intended to convict others of their sin, but not to show them the way to repentance, not to invite them to God's table of grace.

Well, we can assume those things, but if we do, we'll probably spend our time angry, resentful, grumbling, and sulking, and we'll miss the riches that God wants to give us out of God's abundance.

But what if we could lay aside our anger? What if thought less about how others have wronged us and focused on the ways that we need forgiveness, and then experienced it in lifechanging ways? What if we listen to the prophets and repent? What if we think about the harvest that God wants rather than how to do our time and get our pay? What if we think less about whether or not others are getting more than we are and recognize that we are undeserving recipients of the generosity of God?

What peace awaits us? What freedom to live generously? What courage? What forgiveness extended to others? What gratitude? What joy in God's amazing grace? Amen.