

September 24, 2023
Lectionary 25, Year A
The 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Jonah 3:10-4:11
Matthew 20:1-16
Poem by Syndi Masoncup
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(Un)Fair

Last week I mentioned that John was in Norwood High School's production of Matilda. In addition to the show causing me to have a theological crisis about forgiveness, it also caused our family to have a scheduling crisis. You see, every year for the past 14 years, Britton has gone to Camp Calumet's Men's Golf Outing on the second weekend of September. The second weekend in September is always a busy one for our family. Norwood Day is always the Saturday of that weekend. Sunday School always kicks off that weekend, and it's always the first weekend of the soccer season. So, it's always been a challenging weekend for him to be away. This year it was made even more challenging because it was the weekend of the musical, which meant, in addition to being down a driver during a particularly busy weekend, he didn't get to see the whole show. He made it to about half of the second act of the Sunday show by the time he got back from New Hampshire. Every year until this year, the musical has been the third weekend of September, much easier on the schedule for us.

I was worried that they were going to make the change to the second weekend of the month permanent which would be very inconvenient for our family. But when I was sharing my worries with another parent about the fact that they had moved the show up a week, he said that he thought that the only reason that they had done it this year was that the third weekend of the month included the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. That made perfect sense to me. Of course, the school wouldn't want to schedule the musical over a

Jewish holiday and since the date of Rosh Hashana changes every year on the secular calendar, it's likely that it won't fall on the third weekend of the month every year, which means that it's likely that the musical will move back to the third weekend of September next year. What a relief!

Because I had Jewish holidays on the brain, perhaps I was a little bit extra aware this year that Yom Kippur begins tonight and continues through sundown tomorrow. Yom Kippur is the Jewish Day of Atonement, a day when God pronounces judgment on his people. Historically it was the only day of the year when the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple to make ritual sacrifices for atonement and to plead with God to forgive the sins of the people.

Since the destruction of the second Temple in A.D. 70, the Yom Kippur observance has been one of prayer and worship that took place in synagogues and with rabbis.

The ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are days when Jewish people spend their time reflecting on their lives, doing good deeds, and seeking reconciliation with those with whom they were at odds.

It strikes me as particularly interesting that on this day when our Jewish friends are observing Yom Kippur, their holiday that is focused on forgiveness and atonement, we have readings that cause us to take a good hard look at what it means to forgive and to be forgiven.

I feel like our Old Testament and gospel readings for today are some of the most cutting that we have in the lectionary, if not in the Bible. I think that many of us can feel the honesty of these readings, can feel the honesty of Jonah. Jonah is angry that the Ninevites repented. He's angry that he had to be a part of God's merciful work. He's angry that God has had compassion on his enemies.

Jonah is raw, open, honest. His whole story is the story of one who struggled with and against the mercy of God.

From the moment that he tried to run away from God's call to go and preach to the Ninevites to the moment that he preaches his half-hearted sermon in Ninevah, dragging himself through the streets of his enemies, saying, "Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown...Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrow." (Jonah 3:4) to the moment that he says honestly why he had tried to flee from God's call to preach to the Ninevites, "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 4:2b-3), Jonah is honest. Jonah wanted revenge and he didn't get it. Jonah wanted judgment on his enemies and he wanted the judgment to be "guilty" and the sentence to be death and he didn't get it. Jonah resented God's mercy, poured out on those who he, Jonah, had determined to be unworthy of it.

And speaking of unworthy, I've heard through my 24 years of preaching people telling me that they don't like today's gospel reading. Not that they don't understand it, not that they find it confusing, but that they just plain don't like it. Why? Because it's just not fair.

Most people who hear this reading can completely relate to the workers who were there all day, who started first thing in the morning and who worked through the heat of the day. We all probably know what it feels like to have a co-worker who's not pulling his or her weight, who's not doing what he or she is supposed to be doing, who's shows up late or who cuts out early, and we probably all know the resentment that comes along with feeling like it's so completely unfair for that person to take home the same paycheck that we do, to get the same reward for less work or poor work as we do.

That's exactly what happens in the parable that Jesus tells. The story that Jesus tells is about workers in a vineyard, some who worked a full day and others who worked less, sometimes much less, hired later, a 9:00, noon, 3:00, and 5:00,

and all getting the same payment at the end of the day. To us, it makes no sense that someone who worked one hour should get the same pay as someone who worked twelve hours, even if the person who worked for 12 hours was paid fair wage for their time. Because we are no longer comparing the pay with what is fair. We are comparing it with what the other people got. We are comparing it not with what was agreed to, but to an internal sense of justice, that puts us in the role of the heroes.

Very few people who hear this parable hear it from the perspective of the person who worked one hour and was paid the daily wage. For them, this parable is one of abundance grace, it's about the compassion, the mercy of the landowner. We hear it from the perspective of the person who worked twelve hours and got paid the daily wage. For them this is a parable about unfairness. It's about the suspect generosity of the landowner.

We tend to hear Jonah's story from the perspective of Jonah. Of course we do. But how differently would we experience it if we put ourselves in the role of the Ninevites?

When we hear these stories, we don't put ourselves into those roles. But if what we did? How differently would we react to them if we located ourselves with the ones needed grace. Because that's where we belong. With the one who needing grace, needing compassion, needing mercy. As the ones who need repentance and atonement.

And as it turns out, today is the Day of Atonement. Perhaps not our Day of Atonement, but a good day to be reminded that we all need to repent, we all need forgiveness, and we all need to forgive.

Last week I preached about forgiveness, about the benefits of forgiving those who have wronged us. But this week, it seems timely to remember that we all walk by grace, grace given to us by God, grace given to us by others,

And to that end, I want to share a poem that a Jewish friend of mind shared on Facebook this week, a poem that expressed what was in her heart as she approached her faith's Day of Atonement:

To forgive
Is not to forget.
To forgive
Is really to remember
That nobody is perfect
That each of us stumbles
When we want so much to stay upright
That each of us says things
We wish we had never said
That we can all forget that love
Is more important than being right.
To forgive is really to remember
That we are so much more
Than our mistakes
That we are often more kind and caring
That accepting another's flaws
Can help us accept our own.
To forgive is to remember
That the odds are pretty good that
We might soon need to be forgiven ourselves.
That life sometimes gives us more
Than we can handle gracefully.
To forgive is to remember
That we have room in our hearts to

Begin again

And again,

And again.

This poem and our readings for today are all reminders that God's compassion, God's mercy, God's generosity is poured out on us and not just on others. We all need grace. We all need forgiveness. If we are envious of the mercy that God shares with others, then we have missed something significant about ourselves. It's that we need it too. And thanks be to God, for the mercy that God showers upon us and invites us to share with others. Amen.