**Weekend of Sunday, September 24, 2023**

**17th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 25/Year A**

**First Reading: Jonah 3:10—4:11**

**Second Reading: Philippians 1:21-30**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-16**

**Sermon Title: *“God’s Mercy, Joyful Labor, and the Boundless Love of Christ”***

**Theme**

*Matthew narrates one of Jesus’ controversial parables in which Jesus says that the reign of God is like that of a landowner who pays his workers the same wage no matter what time of day they began to work. When God changes God’s mind about punishing Nineveh for their evil ways, Jonah is angry. Yet God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. In baptism we receive the grace of God that is freely given to all. As Martin Luther wrote, in the presence of God’s mercy we are all beggars.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Jonah 3:10--4:11**

10When God saw what [the people of Ninevah] 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.
 4:1But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. 2He 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. 3And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” 5Then 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.
 6The 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. 7But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8When 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.”
 9But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” 10Then 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. 11And 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?”

**Second Reading: Philippians 1:21-30**

21For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.
 27Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. 29For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—30since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

**Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16**

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 1“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; 4and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. 5When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. 6And 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?’ 7They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ 8When 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.’ 9When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12saying, ‘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.’ 13But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ 16So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

**Sermon**

Today, we delve into the rich spiritual tapestry woven through Jonah, Matthew, and Philippians. These passages speak to us about God's mercy, the privilege of laboring in His vineyard, and the prodigal love of Christ.

The Book of Jonah, from which our First Reading comes, is only four chapters long and quite interesting. You could read it entirely in 15 minutes. What has happened *before* our reading is critical to our understanding of what is happening *in* our reading.

Map In the book of Jonah, we encounter a reluctant prophet by the name of Jonah. Little more is known about him except that he was an Israelite from Galilee and he ministered sometime between 786 and 746 BCE. This was a time when the northern tribe of Israel was still an independent nation. But Assyria, an enemy from the north, was gaining power and was a constant threat to Israel.

The capital city of Assyria was Nineveh and that city is the focus of the LORD’s concern. In chapter one, the LORD said to Jonah,

2Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.

But Jonah, being an Israelite, didn’t care, and maybe even delighted in the knowledge that Nineveh was behaving as an enemy of God. And so he disobeyed the LORD, headed the opposite way, nearly died in a storm at sea, got thrown overboard, then swallowed by a large fish, and three days and three nights later got burped up on the shore – where he was once again confronted by the LORD.

Again the LORD commanded Jonah to go to Nineveh and this time he went, but he was not enthusiastic about carrying out his assignment. Nevertheless, the LORD had been at work in the hearts of the Ninevites, and upon hearing Jonah’s message, however poorly it was delivered, they repented and the whole city was saved from destruction.

Well, this did not meet with Jonah’s approval. He hoped that his poorly delivered exhortation would go unheard at best and ignored at worst. Reminder, the Ninevites were the enemy of the Israelites and nothing would have made Jonah happier than to see the LORD vaporize them!

I love verse 4:2. In it Jonah whines:

4:2I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.

If this verse sounds familiar, that is because it is our Gospel Verse for Lent.

The rest of the story is our First Reading and it includes Jonah’s anger, indignation, and subsequent pouting.

Now I can’t think of a time when I was diametrically opposed to God’s will and my involvement in it. So on one hand, it’s difficult for me to relate to this story, but on the other hand, I have found myself in situations declaring that the situation is not fair.

Right now the United States is experiencing another massive influx of illegal immigrants on our southern border, and many will declare that this isn’t fair. We could get into a whole heated political discussion on this but that will only distract us from the issue at hand.

This passage reminds us that God's mercy extends beyond our understanding. The prophet Isaiah, whose ministry came after Jonah’s and after the Israelites were overrun by the Assyrians, wrote these words given to him by the LORD:

Isaiah 55:8For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
 nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
 9For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways
 and my thoughts than your thoughts.

No truer words have ever been spoken.

This reading from Jonah both challenges us to examine our own hearts and prejudices while challenging us to be agents of God's grace and love to all.

We find Jesus telling a similar but different kind of story in the Gospel Reading from Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus shares the parable of the workers in the vineyard. Regardless of when they started laboring, all workers received the same wage.

What are you kidding me? A full day’s pay for an hour’s work? If that was a union workforce, the landowner would have likely gotten a grievance! Not only that, but it just doesn’t make sense. The landowner can’t continue like this or he will go broke! Who does he think he is? God? And of course, in this parable, the landowner IS God.

This parable illustrates God's prodigal love and grace for all, irrespective of our past or when we come to faith in Him. “But Pastor, we’ve been Christians all our lives, and you mean to tell us that those foxhole confessions are good enough?” Apparently so. The parable is told by Jesus about his Heavenly Father, and at the end, the landowner, who *is* God, asks,

15Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?

This passage challenges us to avoid comparing our journeys with others, and to instead focus on our commitment to serve Christ faithfully, maybe even daring us to be as generous.

Oh, and those of us who have enjoyed the prodigal generosity of God all our lives but who continue to cheapen God’s grace by living in sin have a lot of nerve to complain, don’t you think?

Paul has some guidance for us believers in his letter to the Philippians. Paul reminds us that our lives gain their true purpose when we live for Christ. He, Paul, rejoices in suffering for the sake of the Gospel, knowing that through it, Christ is exalted. So rather than complain about:

* God’s desire to save entire populations whom we consider an enemy but are still the creation of the same creator,
* and our perception of fairness,

this passage encourages us to find joy in serving the Lord, even amid challenges, and to stand together in unity for the sake of the Gospel.

Now, let's see if we can find a singular thread running through these seemingly dissimilar passages.

* Jonah's story teaches us about God's boundless mercy and our call to extend it to others.
* Matthew's parable reminds us of the prodigal and undeserved love and grace we receive from God, encouraging us to let go of our prejudices and serve Him with gratitude and humility.
* And in his letter to the Philippians. Paul inspires us to find joy in serving Christ, even when faced with challenges.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

So, how do we apply these teachings in our lives? I’m so glad you asked. I have an answer.

First, let us be instruments of God's mercy, showing love and grace to all, regardless of their past or circumstances or our prejudices.

Second, let us refrain from comparing ourselves with others, recognizing that God's love and grace are freely given to all who come to Him.

Third, let us find joy in serving Christ wholeheartedly, even when the path is difficult.

In conclusion, my dear friends, these passages reveal the depth of God's mercy, the joy of serving Christ, and the fairness of His love. As we embrace these truths, we become vessels of His love and grace, transforming our lives and the lives of those around us. May we always be grateful for God's mercy, find joy in serving Him, and extend His love to all we encounter.

**Prayer**

Generous God, you come to us again and again, no matter how late it is in the day or in our lives.

Calling to us, gathering us in, you give us your good work to do, daily bread, and boundless grace.

Increase in us a generous spirit so that we may do your work with joy alongside others whom you also love.

We celebrate your salvation not only in our lives, but also in the lives of other people, even those we had not imagined would be included in the kingdom you are bringing.

Align us with your ways and help us receive your gifts of justice and mercy as good news. In Jesus Christ we pray. Amen