

"An Argument of Grace"
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 20
24 September 2023
Trinity+St. Peter's Episcopal Church
San Francisco, California

Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

INI

The Prophet's complaint and God's on-going grace

In the first reading we meet an ancient pattern in the Pentateuch, namely that of grumbling and murmuring. It is called a *riv* pattern in which the community or individuals have a grievance against God. Here in this reading in the final chapter of Jonah, it is the prophet himself who has the *riv*. He has come to Nineveh to announce God's judgement and punishment, but much to his surprise the city repents. However, this book is not about Nineveh. It is about the prophet and his or her call – how it is accepted and done, or how it is something that is to be resisted, and how God truly judges. Jonah expects God to be like the God of Numbers 23:19, the God of Balaam,

*"God is not a human being who speaks falsely,
nor a mortal, who feels regret.
Is God one to speak and not act,
to decree and not bring it to pass?"*

In this text Balaam is asked to bless although he has come to do the exact opposite. However, Balaam relents, and he indeed blesses. Jonah, however, finds it difficult to redeem. God cares for God's creation, and the creation of humankind as well. *"And 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?"* Indeed, it is several aspects of God's care for creation that stand behind God and God's judgments. In this sermon that becomes the Book of Jonah, we meet several agents of God's will to redeem: the great fish, the plant, the hot east wind, the sun, and the worm. All of these elements stand where Jonah finds it difficult to stand. The lesson that we are called to receive is to honor God's intent to redeem all of humankind, to save them all, to stand behind them all. This understanding leads us to today's Gospel, and its lesson about how God treats us.

Who is first and who is last – the Equanimity of God's grace

Matthew sets up a certain sense of drama in his telling of this parable of the workers in the vineyard. Each of the segments or sequences is introduced by

similar language – “he went out” and a time designation. There is a pattern here into which to put particular circumstances. At the first the landlord makes an agreement for “*the usual daily wage.*” When he goes out again, he offers to pay “*whatever is right.*” And finally, at the last when he goes out, he offers nothing. Thus, Matthew sets us up to wonder what the outcome might be, how this will be an indication of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The lesson begins to be learned with the order in which the laborers are paid – last to first. It is a hidden clue – we really don’t understand the significance of the order until the end of the parable. It is in verses 10-15 that we see the key to the telling.

Here is the pattern:11. When they get the same, they grumble.

12. They argue with the landowner
13. The landowner argues that he is not cheating them.
14. Go on – I can give what I wish to give
15. Is this an occasion for grumbling or envy?

It is interesting that the argument ends with the landowner’s statement about the last being first, etc. The complainers have nothing more to say, and the reader is left with the truth of the parable – “*So, the last will be first, and the first last.*” It is a radical lesson, especially in our own time of greed. But if we are tempted by the landowner’s statement to be an ethical point in modern day economics, we ought to be disappointed. This is not a lesson in business acumen, but rather a lesson on mercy and grace. The work does not make for the grace. The grace is given equally. Given that, however, we now have to decide how we will be just with others. The ball is placed squarely in our court. Here the First Reading preachers have an advantage with a first reading that adds grist to this mill. But then there is Paul, who had (given our own human understanding) a right to grumble.

Suffering and yet living

There is opportunity here to grumble, however, he does not. His epistle is written in the context of his own suffering and from this situation he now addresses not the present of his difficulties, but rather the future of God’s grace. Regardless of what happens, Paul sees it as a cause for joy, “*To me, living is Christ, and dying is gain.*” The pericope is made up of three parts (I – 1:18b-20, II – 1:21-24, and III – 1:25-26). The latter four verses come from his exhortation to steadfastness and unity (1:27-2:18).

The point for us and for Paul, and this is most telling in our times, is that regardless of what happens, we are still in Christ – alive! One commentator entitles this section as “*The Desired Outcome – to be with Christ.*” One can hear in his letter Paul’s sorrow at being separated from the Christians at Philippi, but one can also hear clearly his voice of faith. He goes on, however, from merely existing to living a life that has meaning, and that matters. He asks us to live our lives (with him) in a “*manner worthy of the Gospel.*” Paul sees in this lesson a unity that is evidenced in the Body of Christ’s standing together in the community with lives that give evidence of God’s grace and good will. It is, however, also a lesson in struggling – in realizing that God asks something of us. There is no running away, as Jonah did. There is only living in the situation, as Paul and Jesus did.

I am reminded of St. John Chrysostom's Great Easter Homily. With great affection, Bishop Bill Swing would read it from the altar surrounded by all who had attending the Great Vigil of Easter. Here is the part that best completes this sermon on grumbling, being paid as much as the last to arrive.

*Are there any who are devout lovers of God?
Let them enjoy this beautiful bright festival!*

*Are there any who are grateful servants?
Let them rejoice and enter into the joy of their Lord!*

*Are there any weary with fasting?
Let them now receive their wages!*

*If any have toiled from the first hour,
let them receive their due reward;
If any have come after the third hour,
let him with gratitude join in the Feast!
And he that arrived after the sixth hour,
let him not doubt; for he too shall sustain no loss.
And if any delayed until the ninth hour,
let him not hesitate; but let him come too.
And he who arrived only at the eleventh hour,
let him not be afraid by reason of his delay.
For the Lord is gracious and receives the last even as the first.
He gives rest to him that comes at the eleventh hour,
as well as to him that toiled from the first.*

This came to reality once at the Easter Vigil at Saint Francis Lutheran Church, where new members were received during the Baptismal Renewal at the Font. We had completed that portion of the Liturgy and were gathered at the altar for the First Mass of Easter. Suddenly we heard a pounding on the church door, and a voice crying "Let me in!" We stopped, opened the doors, and there was a new member who had come to the liturgy late. We moved from the altar back to the font and repeated the Baptismal Renewal because the first shall be last, and the last first. It was a poignant lesson on God's grace, given at God's time. Anyone who comes here at any time is welcome!

SDG