

Lectionary 25 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 24, 2017

Jonah 3:10– 4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The Jewish religion is in the season of its high holy days. Religious observances that are required by the Jewish Law in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus. You may have heard of these holy days. Rosh Hashanah has recently taken place. Later in October is Sukkot, the Festival of Tabernacles. This week, observant Jews will commemorate Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement. Which begins at sundown this Friday and continues until sundown on Saturday. (Jews reckon that the day begins at sundown. You may recall that the first page of the Bible says things like: *And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.*)

So Friday sunset begins the Day of Atonement. The day when Jews turn to God for the forgiveness of sins. The English word “atonement” literally means at-one-ment. To be at one. And to be at one with God, for both Christians and Jews, requires us to turn from our sins, and turn to God who is merciful and abounding in steadfast love. The similar event that we have in Christianity is the Season of Lent, and Ash Wednesday in particular.

In the final hours of Yom Kippur, this Saturday, all around the world, the Jewish people will read the book of the prophet Jonah. By coincidence, this morning, we are reading from the prophet Jonah.

We are making our way through selections from Matthew’s gospel this year. The Jesus that we meet in Matthew’s gospel has a keen way of confronting us with the spiritual challenges of following Jesus Christ. Ever since the fifth chapter, when Jesus said these words: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* Matthew’s gospel is full of teachings and parables that take us into poverty of spirit. Not a destination that we might choose for ourselves. But the vastness of God and of God’s mercy relativizes our perspective. For at least a hundred years, the goal of most Baptist preaching in America was to lead people to a climactic moment when they could sing, “Just As I Am Without One Plea.” (Something Baptists refer to as the “altar call.”) Just as I am without one plea. Poverty of spirit. In the face of God’s majesty and mercy and generosity.

And so on this pathway of being poor in spirit, Matthew brings us today to Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard. Some people begin work at sunrise. They are joined by others at 9am. And more still at noon. And even more at 3pm. And even more get hired at 5pm. Pretty close to quitting time. And at sundown everyone gets the same wage. The people who started work at

6am and worked a twelve hour day get the same pay as the ones who were hired at 5pm and only worked one hour. Unfair!

This parable only occurs in Matthew's gospel. Luke's gospel is the only gospel that tells us the parable of the prodigal son. Two sons. One stays on the farm with Dad and works hard. The other heads off to Vegas and blows his inheritance. But in the end, the father loves both of his sons. Both today's parable in Matthew and the more famous prodigal son parable in Luke invite us to imagine the situation in which we are faithful. We stay true. We stay home and take care of Momma. We go to church and give our tithes. We keep our insurance payments up to date. We cut carbs. We put the recycables in the recycle bin. We do the right thing. The RESPONSIBLE thing. And then God extends his love and his blessing to some lackadaisical, self-centered, short-sighted fool. Has that ever happened to you? It's happened to me! Do we like it? No. Is it fair? No!

And the gospel writers know this. At least Luke and certainly Matthew. They wrote down these parables of Jesus because they knew that we would feel like this sometimes.

There is a line in today's gospel when the all-day workers complain to the owner. And he replies: *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?* It's my money. It's my vineyard. It's my enterprise. *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?* The word "envious" is a liberal translation. Jesus uses the expression "evil eye." Are you envious because I am generous? The literal translation is *Are you giving me the evil eye because I am good?*

If we are coming to God from that place of spiritual poverty— Just as I am without one plea— then we really can't plea for a special deal, can we? And we can't demand that God be gracious toward us, and throw the book at someone else.

The book of Jonah poses the same questions. With a much more wicked sense of humor. In today's first reading, God just plainly says to Jonah: *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* Twice in our text, God asks, *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* And Jonah says, *"Yes, it's right for me to be angry. Hell, yes. Angry enough to die."*

Our reading today is from the end of Jonah. The Jews who go to Yom Kippur services on Saturday will get the whole story, all 48 verses of it. The most famous character in Jonah is the whale— or the fish— which is a very memorable accessory to the story. But for the people who created the Bible, the most important character was the city of Nineveh. It was the capital of the Assyrian empire. It looms large over the book of the prophet Isaiah. It is the centerpiece of the book of the prophet Nahum. And is referenced elsewhere. For the Jewish people, the Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria. The so-called Ten Lost Tribes of Israel were gobbled up by Nineveh and the empire that Nineveh signified.

So Nineveh is bigger than the whale at least in the minds of the people who first recorded the

story of Jonah. God sent Jonah to Nineveh, and the whale got involved in the retrieval of Jonah after Jonah went as quickly as he could in the opposite direction, to the border of civilization in the west.

So this story, the 48 verses of Jonah, are comically over-the-top. Jonah is sent by God to the worst city in the worst empire of his people's worst enemy. With a message that they should repent. And they do. And Jonah has heartburn over the issue. For the same reason that the guys in our gospel reading have heartburn. He's mad that God's love and mercy extends to people that he doesn't think deserve it.

Now, if you wanted to have some fun, you can go and read what Islam, the Koran, says about Jonah. The Koran has all the same wonderful details. With the giant fish. In Islam, Jonah is sick when he comes out of the fish. That makes sense to me! And the vine that we have in our first reading today was sent to cover Jonah while he recovered. So that part is different. And the Muslims built a mosque at Nineveh that supposedly contained the tomb of Jonah. And it was destroyed by ISIS three years ago. I don't know if the tomb could really have contained Jonah. His career would have preceded Mohammed and the Koran by over 1300 years. But it's an interesting footnote to the Jonah story, and a testimony to the enduring popularity of the story across all of the three Abrahamic religions.

The Old Testament book of Jonah reveals God's concern and mercy even for people who do not know him. There are the 120,000 people of Nineveh. The out-and-out enemies of Israel. But in the earlier part of the story, the sailors who were transporting Jonah were also pagans who turned to the God of Israel. God is merciful to all of them. And then there are the plants and animals. The giant fish, to be sure. But the vine that grows and then dies. And then the cattle, who in the story also repent and put on sackcloth and ashes and enter into fasting alongside the people. "Who knows?" the anonymous king of Nineveh says, "God may change his mind."

And the very last two words of the book. *Many animals.* It comes back to the creation. *You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?*

In Jonah, God has a high regard for what we would call non-believers. Even non-believers who are our enemies. And God has a high regard for cattle. And God's project of mercy and justice extends to all of it. Everything he made. When Jonah is awakened by the sailors in the first chapter, he confesses his faith: *'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'* That's Jonah's self-understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Right in the middle of a giant storm at sea. Jonah testifies: "I worship the One who made all of this."

You and I are blessed to be workers in God's vineyard. He has made a covenant with us through

Jesus Christ that is unique to us Christians and that opens us to all of God's goodness and eternal joy. We are special. But we are not *THAT* special. The work of this vineyard extends to all others, even the people we do not respect, even the people we hate. The work of this vineyard extends to the creation that God has made, heaven, earth, and sea. Animals, fish, and plants. You and I, through Christ, are cherished and saved; and we are also told we must remain "poor in spirit." Just as I am without one plea. God's amazing "YES" to you and to me is also a "YES" to the whole world out there. And the scriptures today tell us that our attitude should reflect that.

Yom Kippur. Day of Atonement. At-one-ment. So that all may be at one. The vision of the book of Jonah is that God's mercy will bring shalom to the entirety of creation. Amen.