

Parish of the Divine Love

Homily Sunday September 20, 2020

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

GOD'S GRACE VS HUMAN SELFISHNESS.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Sisters and brothers in Christ,

Really today, God is showing us how God's thought is higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55: 8), and God's grace surpassing human understanding. In our reading from Jonah, we find that God has repeated his call to Jonah to go and preach repentance to the city of Nineveh, and this time, Jonah goes and warns the city that God will destroy them for "their evil ways," though he does not preach repentance as prophets normally do. What follows has elements of both satire and humor, for the pagan city performs the most amazing, total repentance in the Bible: not only does the king demand that everyone fast, put on sackcloth as a sign of mourning, and pray to God for forgiveness, but even all the animals must participate!

And how does Jonah respond to the overwhelming success of his preaching? He "became angry;" he is not at all happy that the people of Nineveh have repented, and he actually has the audacity to give God a self-serving account of why he fled from God when first asked to go to Nineveh! In effect, Jonah says, 'I knew you were too gracious and merciful to destroy the Ninevites, so why should I go and preach to them about their punishment. I knew you would never do it! God is not fooled, however, by Jonah's melodramatic speech, and simply asks him, 'why are you so angry?' because he recognizes that Jonah has not acted out of sensitivity to God's ultimate purpose for Nineveh, but out of his own selfishness.

Jonah confirms the accuracy of God's judgment by stalking off to sit down outside the city to watch what God was going to do. Here the story takes a final poke at Jonah's pride: Jonah is sitting outside in the hot sun, and God causes a plant (a small tree or large bush?) to grow up and give Jonah shade. Jonah "was very happy about the bush," but then God sent a worm to attack the plant "so that it withered" (4.6-7). God sends an even hotter sun, and Jonah is angry again, "angry enough to die." The moral of the story finally is pointed out to Jonah: he is angry because the plant that gave him shade has died, but Jonah had nothing to do with the plant growing up or dying.

His mood changes based on whether or not he feels good. God, on the other hand, was concerned about the Ninevites, because he was responsible for them, because he had compassion on his creatures, even though they were not part of the covenant people Israel. Rather than rejoice at the pardoning of some of God's creatures, Jonah is 'ticked' because God has not acted in the way Jonah wished.

A final exhibit in our survey of the biblical pattern of God's grace and human selfishness is the parable of the generous landowner in Matthew 20. Jesus here continues his teaching about the kingdom of heaven, challenging the usual views of his day, and ours.

The landowner begins hiring workers early in the day, and continues to hire throughout the day, promising each worker the daily wage. At the end of the day, the landowner begins paying them, and

gives each one the same amount, which, understandably, angers those who have been working all day. 'Why,' they ask, 'do those who have only worked one hour get the same amount as those who worked many hours?' The landowner replies that he is free to choose how much to pay his workers, and those who complain are simply envious that he is generous. Though the early workers have received what they were promised, they selfishly think that no one else should receive as much as they have. The landowner, of course, represents God, and the workers are the believers who follow him. Those who began in the vineyard early assume that this gives them special status, that they are somehow worth more than the later workers. The work they do could be any kind of task that Christians engage with as they live their lives; it is not the kind or amount of work one does, but God's grace alone which determines one's unity with God.

The grace of God is generous beyond human imagining, and granting that grace reflects God's sovereignty, not human merit. Just as in the case of the Israelites in the wilderness, or Jonah's prophecy in Nineveh, the early workers here focused on their own needs and desires, and not on the larger vision of God which includes every creature, and not just humanity. It's not all about us, is another way this theme could be expressed, and of course this is as relevant for hearers today as it was for Jesus' original audience. Having looked at Exodus 16, Jonah 3, and Matthew 20, we might conclude that a person's obsession with himself or herself is the root problem in the human relationship with God, that we are so focused on ourselves that we are unable to look beyond ourselves to a greater reality.

While this flaw may seem insurmountable, another of our readings, Psalm 145, affirms that it is possible for people to rise above their limitations to enter into a genuine relationship with God. The psalm is a beautiful song of hope and praise to God, acknowledging his presence in every aspect of life, his goodness and love for all that he has made: "I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. Every day I will bless you and praise your name forever and ever. Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. His greatness is unsearchable. The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing...." (145.9)

God chooses to give generously to each person, no matter how we might deem the 'quality or length of their work'. The grace, love and mercy of God are extended equally to everyone, absolutely everyone. God's grace and love are not dependent on how holy you are, how much work you do for the church, how long you've been attending this church. God's grace and love are not dependent on how much you give to the church, how much you volunteer, how nice you are, how much you pray or read your bible. None of these earn you a greater share of God's love, none of these earn you additional servings of grace over and above your neighbor who might not work/pray/live as well as you.

What we learn about God from this parable, is that he keeps going out in search for people to receive his grace, just as the landowner continued to go to the market hour after hour to find workers in the vineyard. God seeks out the eager hard workers and the lazy-last minute workers, because his grace and love are for everyone – in equal measures. The life that God offers us in Jesus Christ, is no different for me as a priest as it is for someone on the fringes of faith – each of us is invited to share in the renewing and reconciling love of God that defeated the darkness of sin and death on the Cross and brokered through into the world in the Resurrection of Jesus – the joy, the love, the mercy, responsibility, the privilege of being Children of God is the same for each of us. Stop comparing yourself and your life to others and

you will create room for grace to emerge. Refuse to compete in such a way that someone must lose for you to win. Trust that in God's world there is enough for everyone. Let go of expectations based on what you think you or others deserve. Give God the freedom to pay whatever is right knowing that God's ways are not your ways. Make no judgments of yourself or others. That is the way of grace, the way of God.

Let Us Pray:

Lord God, your Son came among us to serve and not be served, and to give his life for the world. Lead us by his love to serve all those to whom the world offers no comfort and little help. Through us give hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, peace to the troubled, and rest to the weary, through your Son, Jesus Christ our lord.

Amen