

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
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Jonah 3:10-4:11

When God saw what the people of Nineveh 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. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He 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. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then 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. The 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. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When 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." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then 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. 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?"

Matthew 20:1-16

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

Forty years ago, John Dominic Crossan wrote a classic work called, “The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story.” Forty years on, the book is dated in some ways, but in others, it still speaks.¹ It speaks to me because I jotted down a quote from “The Dark Interval” in the margin of my bible. At the Book of Ruth, there is a scribbled note: “The question posed by the Book of Ruth and Jonah is this: ‘What if God does not play the game by our rules?’”²

You remember the Book of Ruth? It is set in the days of the Judges, but almost certainly, it was put in its final form after the Babylonian Exile. The Exile was a fifteen on a ten point scale, in terms of its devastating effect. The people were forcibly removed from the Holy Land, carted off to Babylon, and there they lived for 70 years. The people experienced the Exile as a judgment from God for departing from their covenant with the LORD and they were determined to be faithful so it would not happen again.

The problem was, what did being faithful look like? In answer to this question “Israel after the Exile developed tendencies in two quite opposite directions: on the one hand a major tendency to draw within herself and emphasize the exclusiveness of her election as God’s chosen people, and on the other hand (there was a broad movement in the opposite direction) which sought to make (Israel) ‘a blessing in the midst of the earth’ (Is 19:24) , ‘a light to the nations’ (Is 49:6). Among the noblest monuments of this latter tendency are the books of Jonah and Ruth.”³

The former tendency, the withdrawal, can be seen in “the harsh decrees of Ezra and Nehemiah which required Hebrew men to divorce their foreign wives and marry only within the covenant community (Ezra 10:1-5; Neh 13:23-27).”⁴ The story of Ruth is an outright and negative critique of Ezra and Nehemiah.

“(The book starts in Moab, where some people of Judah had gone to escape a famine. The opening verses of (the book) tell (the story of the marriage of a non-Israelite, Moabite woman named Ruth) to a Hebrew man and how, on his death, she chose to return to Judah with her mother-in-law to share the fortunes of her (deceased) husband’s people rather than remain in the relative security of her native land. (In Judah) her loyalty and kindness won her the love of Boaz, and through her marriage to him she became the great-grandmother of David the king.”

So the Book of Ruth is asking, “What if God does not play the game by your rules, Ezra? What about it, Nehemiah?” And then, there is the Book of Jonah. In the story, Jonah is a prophet who is given the job by God of preaching repentance to Nineveh, the Assyrians. The Assyrians were loathed by the Hebrew people in general and by Jonah in particular... remember it was they who conquered the North Kingdom and wiped those tribes off the face of the earth forever.

Jonah really doesn’t want the gig so he gets on a boat heading in the opposite direction. He gets thrown overboard, swallowed by a big fish, coughed up on the shore, stumbles on to Nineveh, and preaches, “Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be over thrown.” And you know what happened.

They repented and God forgave them. How awful is that! Jonah’s prophecy doesn’t come to pass (at least it would have been satisfying to see them get destroyed) and a people he hates get forgiven. He

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2015-09/dark-interval-john-dominic-crossan>

² Page 77 in the first edition of “The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story”, copyright 1975.

³ Introductory notes to Ruth in the New Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV, copyright 1977, page 325.

⁴ ibid

tells God, “This is totally awful. This is why I took the boat in the opposite direction in the first place. I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and if they repented you’d take them back. Just kill me Lord!”

The book ends with the verses in our reading for today with God trying to help Jonah understand and work through his anger. God tries to help Jonah see what mercy is all about. It is a hard lesson for Jonah: “What if God does not play the game by my rules? I knew God wouldn’t. That is the problem.”

Jesus clearly follows the tradition of the Book of Ruth and the Book of Jonah rather than Ezra and Nehemiah. You can see this in countless ways, and certainly you can see it in the parable we heard today, the laborers in the vineyard.

People who needed and wanted work are given it. And regardless of the time of day the person started to work, they got paid the same thing

I consulted with Human Resources professionals about this. Turns out, it is clear that laborers in the vineyard are hourly workers, not independent contractors, and if you paid people the same thing, regardless of the hours worked, you would become the subject of a lawsuit...and you would lose.

What in the world is going on? Well, Jesus says, “This is a parable about the kingdom of heaven.” The landowner’s actions tell us something about how God acts. And clearly, God does not play the labor game by our rules.

Here’s the thing...here’s what is going on...Laboring in God’s vineyard is a gift. It is its own reward. Whatever else we get out of it, whatever “payment” we receive, that is just gravy. We can never presume that by working in God’s vineyard, however long or however hard, that we are placing God in our debt. God is in charge. God is generous. God gives to the last the same as to the first. And what God gives is a relationship...how can that be prorated? God chooses to give the gift of the relationship fully and to everyone.

So, at the bottom line, this parable is about God’s call coming to us as pure, unadulterated, unexpected and unearned grace. There is a vineyard. There is a place for us in it. Regardless of when we arrive, or how long we work, we get the same thing.

Let me leave you with one image, one way to look at this from a different way around. Last week in our Adult Sunday School class Dr. Watts was talking about the irresistible grace of God. And she said, “It is as though you are in a coma, flat out on a table in the emergency room. And suddenly, coming to you, completely from outside of yourself, there is this connection, this light, this shock, which brings you to life again and stunned, you open your eyes and come into consciousness.” That is what we are talking about here. That is the way God works. We all open our eyes to new life through the shocking grace of God.

Ruth, the foreign woman who becomes the great-grandmother of David, King of the Jews.... Jonah, who preaches judgment on a people he hates, only to see them repent and be forgiven.... A landowner who gives to the last the same as to the first...these are all stories of grace, stories of the unexpected, stories where God does not play by our rules. And aren’t we glad! Isn’t that the good news after all? Isn’t that exactly what we all need? ...the shocking grace of God. Amen.