

## **While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season**

### **September 20, 2020 – 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

*We continue in the ‘green’ season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve’s message for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. We will be outside this week (weather permitting) at our parking lot (“Praise Lot”) at 9:30 am.*

#### **Lessons for Pentecost 16**

*Psalm 145:1-8; Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16*

*The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

We heard these comforting words in our Psalm this week. We heard these comforting words in Psalm 103 last week. They convey a welcoming picture of our God – gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. This is the God to whom we can turn, this is the God whom we can trust, this is the God whom we praise and worship. This is the God of our weary years, the God of our silent tears. This is the God who is there when we stray, when we forget. The Psalmist knew this. It is good to be reminded:

*The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

Sometimes we don’t want to be reminded. We look around in the world and see how things are and we want God to act and take charge. We want God to put aside some of God’s hallmark grace and mercy. We want to see God be a little quicker with the divine anger. We want God to step out of that steadfast love and do something – because the way things unfold in life just isn’t fair sometimes. So, God, for heaven’s sake … do something!

We meet the prophet Jonah today. Jonah does not need to be reminded of the Psalmist’s words – indeed, he knows them by heart. We hear them in Jonah’s unusual complaint addressed to God: “I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Yes, God’s prophet, Jonah, knew all this about God. He knew it when God first called Jonah to go to Nineveh – hated Nineveh. God was sending him to Nineveh to give the people time to repent, to be saved, to be spared. Not the message of immediate destruction that Jonah would have favored! We know the story; Jonah boarded a ship headed in the exact opposite direction from Nineveh. The storms came, Jonah knew why, so he jumped ship (he actually allowed his fellow sailors to toss him overboard to save the ship.) He landed in the sea where a whale or a great fish swallowed him and, after three days, spit him up on the shore – where else? Nineveh! There Jonah did what he was initially called to do: he delivered the message – *Nineveh, you have 40 days, repent!*

Unlike most preachers, Jonah was actually hoping that his sermon, his words, would be ignored. Jonah like most Israelites abhorred Nineveh and the Ninevites. They had waged war against Israel, they had conquered Israel, they had treated Israel badly. Why should God spare these foreigners who had so mistreated the Chosen People?

So, for Jonah, it was good news, bad news when he heard that the people from the king on down had repented. Good news – effective preaching by him, bad news the people did what God had wanted and would be spared. Yes, the narrator tells us: *this was very displeasing to Jonah and he became angry.* That’s when Jonah let’s loose on God, God who had called him, God who had tracked him down. God who had him delivered to Nineveh with the first Uber Fish service. Yes, Jonah let’s loose on God – who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and

abounding in steadfast love. “I knew it! I knew it God! I knew you would relent; I knew you would have mercy. I knew it – it is better for me to die than to live! Jonah’s anger has got the best of him – anger toward the Ninevites who are saved, anger toward the God who saved them. God simply leaves a question for him to ponder: *“Is it right for you to be angry?”*

In the last scene, Jonah has gone off to see what will happen in this newly spared city. He finds shade under a bush that God has made to grow up. Yes, our slow to anger God shows some mercy for Jonah who will have reprieve from the heat of the day. Jonah might be unhappy with God, but he is happy about the shade. God will use that bush to make a point. God takes away the bush and turns up the heat, so to speak. Jonah is again angry now that his bush is gone. This gives God the chance to make the final point with another question for Jonah to ponder: *Should I not be concerned with Nineveh in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left?*

We leave Nineveh and Jonah, perhaps understanding that God was not only speaking to the Ninevites, but to Jonah and his fellow Israelites, to affirm the words of the Psalmist and their reach:

*The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

The episode puts an exclamation point on the words shared by the prophet Isaiah: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways, says the Lord.”*

Jesus’ parable today, brings us a picture of the kingdom of heaven which features some folks who seem to be just as displeased as Jonah by unfair graciousness and generosity, in this case, that of a landowner. The parable begins with a simple premise – there is a landowner who needs workers for his vineyard. He goes to the marketplace where those seeking work congregate and hires those available. The landowner is in constant search of more workers – he goes down to the marketplace throughout the day and continues to hire workers. He is still hiring late in the afternoon – 5:00 pm – close to quitting time. Nothing seems amiss until it comes time to pay the workers. He begins by paying the last to arrive, the ones who did the least work – and he gives them a full day’s pay! The others looking on are noting this and begin to smile, thinking of how much they will receive – after all, they had worked longer (and harder!). But any smiles they had turn to frowns, as it becomes clear, each one will receive the same pay – a normal day’s wage – even those who started at the break of day and endured the hottest part of the day in the vineyard! They grumbled! Indeed, they grumbled, they murmured, they muttered things under their breaths until they could not hold it in: *“These last workers only worked an hour – you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat!”* This gives the landowner a chance to speak words that echo God’s words to Jonah: *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?*

The landowner gets the last word in the parable, but what about the sequel? the next day? the next morning when the landowner goes out early in the morning to hire workers? Will anyone be there? Why come early when you get the same wage by coming late and working less? This parable certainly leaves us these questions about a generous but no so economically savvy landowner. This is no way to run a business, but Jesus wants to tell us something about the way God runs the kingdom of heaven.

The parable begins with a landowner hiring – he needs workers. If we think of this premise, his reckless strategy will surely backfire considering the search for workers the next day. But what if the premise of the vineyard parable is that it is about the workers who have a need – a need to be in the vineyard under the watch and care of this landowner? Remember his

words to those midday workers: “I will pay you whatever is right.” This landowner will do what is right – for each worker.

I find most striking, the response of those still standing idle late in the afternoon to the question, ‘why are you not working’: “Because no one has hired us.” Wow! These are people who have been neglected, overlooked. We can imagine the reasons that no one asked them to work. We know there are many unemployed in our day who would like to find work, who would like to be invited to work. Now, our landowner might have thought: “It is late in the day, there is not much they will be able to do, they may not be good workers – I’ll just send them along, tell them to come back tomorrow.” No, not at all. “Come and work, come to my vineyard, I will do what is right **for you**.” What an overwhelming joy it must have been to receive the invitation to the vineyard, to have someone break through their plight of being idle and connect with them. What an incredible joy is must have been to receive a full day’s wage and be connected to One who does what is right for them.

Yes, the kingdom of heaven is a place run by a recklessly generous landowner. Whose ways are not like the ways of the world. Another way to describe this recklessly generous landowner is this:

*The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

Another way to describe this recklessly generous landowner is with a picture of a man on a Cross stretching out his arms in love to invite us into the vineyard, God’s vineyard. Or to imagine a picture of a handful of newly hired workers, or 120,000 newly repentant city-dwellers finding this gracious vineyard.

Today, we receive the gift of this recklessly generous landowner when we will stretch out our hands to receive the bread and the cup and hear the words, “given for you”. May we always receive with joy the gift of Jesus, the gift that is right for us, right for me, right for you. Amen