

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 24 September 2017 (Proper 20A)
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

Grant us, O Lord, not to mind earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to cleave to those that shall abide; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Jonah 3:10–4:11

Psalm 145

Philippians 1:21-27

Matthew 20:1-16

These past few weeks, we have been hearing powerful stories about forgiveness and reconciliation. We learnt that we are called to seek reconciliation with those who wrong us (and, I believe, with those whom we have ourselves wronged) over and over again, never giving up on the prospect of the transformation this work brings. We have learned that we are called to forgive the sins and the debts of those who wrong or owe us because we ourselves have been forgiven by God. We have seen the consequences for failing to live up to this standard; how when we do not forgive when we have ourselves been forgiven we cut ourselves off from God and our neighbours, cut ourselves off from the transforming power of divine love entering our lives and returning it to the world. Today, we are shown more about the justice of God, the vast extent of God's power to forgive and breadth of inclusion in that work.

The story of Jonah is perhaps one of my favourite in all of Holy Writ. While the story of Jonah's sojourn in the belly of the whale is indeed amusing and instructive, it is the story of Johan's work in Nineveh that, somehow to me, rings truest to human nature. After the fish "vomited out Jonah upon the dry land" (2:10), to quote the text,

God tells Jonah for the second time to go to Nineveh and call the people there to repentance for their wickedness. This time he goes. When he arrives, Jonah preaches, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” And what happens? To Jonah’s great surprise, the people responded, called a fast, put on sack cloth and ashes (even the king), and they repented. In response, and this should be no surprise to us, especially given what we have been hearing about God’s abundance in forgiveness, God repented of his plan to lay waste to the city.

You might have thought that Jonah would be pleased. He had done what God had asked of him, he travelled a great distance, preached God’s word to the people of Nineveh, and all his hard effort paid off, the people were saved. But no. And this is the part that is so human. Jonah is disappointed that the people actually repented. It is perfectly clear that he wanted to see the whole place burnt to the ground for the wickedness of the people. Indeed, this is what Jonah wanted from the beginning, why he didn’t want to go to Nineveh in the first place. He didn’t even want to give the people a chance. Jonah must have believed that whatever evil the Ninevehns had done was beyond salvation. Lurking in Jonah seems to have been that righteous sense that the bad guys should be punished, even if they turn from their wicked ways. That the people were rewarded with God’s favour even after they converted to the good leaves Jonah feeling upset and angry. God sees this and asks Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry?” But all Jonah can do is get sulky, so sulky, in fact, that he “went out of the city and sat to the east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in

the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.”

As often happens in these stories, God helps Jonah see where he has gone off the rails by teaching him a lesson. God provides Jonah with a plant to shade him from the sun while he keeps his vigil. Jonah is, of course, thrilled to have this plant to keep him cool. But in the morning “God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered” and Jonah found himself sweltering again. Always one for drama, Jonah proclaimed, “It is better for me to die than to live.” In response, God laid it out for Jonah:

You pity the plant, for which you did not labour, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night, and perished in a night. And should not I pity 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 much cattle?

And here ended the story. We can only assume that Jonah got the point. It is clear enough: how can Jonah pity the plant (and himself) and not the people of Nineveh where so many responded to the word of God, responded to the call for repentance, who turned their lives towards the love and justice of God. We are called to empathy and solidarity with all who join in God’s work, in God’s project, who labour in God’s field. We are called to value all the contributions to the work of God, large or small, even made at the last moment, see them worthy of reward, worthy of inclusion in the unfolding kingdom of God. This is the point of today’s Gospel from Matthew.

The parable of the householder takes as its premise a basic economic lesson: labourers expect to be paid for their work. You work a full day, you get a full day's wages, and this is what the householder did for those who laboured in his vineyard. Yet he did more than this. Throughout the day he invited people standing idly by to join in the work. Some spent the whole day in the fields, some half, some only an hour or so. When it came time to pay the workers, he paid each the same. Now those who worked a full day got upset and filled with that righteous anger we have seen from those who seek only a narrow view of justice, saw they worked harder and deserved to be paid more. The householder pointed out that all were paid for a full day's work and no one was cheated. It was just that those who joined in at the end got the same as those who started from the beginning.

And so it goes with inclusion in God's work of salvation. Those who have been labouring for the kingdom for their whole lives are included just as those who only joined in the work in the last hour. What matters is that each of us can, at any moment, choose to respond to the invitation to work for the kingdom and benefit from the same love. It also means that if any of us slip up, fall short, run away and get swallowed by a great big fish, we, too, have the chance to get back to work, and rejoin the project.

Over and over we are called into relationship with God. Over and over we are called into deeper relationship with our neighbours, to be reconciled with those whom we have wronged and who have wronged us. Over and over we hear the voices of the prophets and of Christ himself, calling us to cooperate with God in building up the

kingdom of God, labouring for justice, working for peace and reconciliation, doing the work of feeding the poor, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and visiting the sick and those in prison. We can be called into this work, or back to it, at any time and in any place and we can have the confidence to know that what we do matters and will be welcomed, even at the eleventh hour, and receive the wages of love.

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