

Pentecost 17-September 24, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16

“Happiness...Until, When”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from his son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

It is hard to find a time when Jonah was happy in today's first lesson. There are only four chapters in this action packing book of Jonah. Jonah wasn't happy in the first chapter of this book when he was called by God to preach his word of repentance to the large, wicked city of Nineveh. Jonah wasn't happy when he attempted to run from this call from the Lord and was tossed around by the storm on the ship that was manned by a crew of heathen mariners. Jonah wasn't happy when he was swallowed by the big fish and spit on the dry land after living in it for three days. Jonah wasn't happy that after all his obvious reluctance, the Lord still insisted that he was the one to go preach to the Ninevites. Jonah wasn't happy because he apparently had witnessed before that the Lord might change his mind about bringing destruction to this wicked city. Did you notice when Jonah was happy in the reading you heard today? It was only in verse 6 that might be personified on the picture of your bulletin today. Jonah was for a moment very happy when the Lord appointed a bush to provide him with protection from the scorching sun. Jonah was happy only for a short time. Jonah's happiness returned to anger when the Lord demonstrated his abundant mercy to not only the 120,000 residents of Nineveh, but also to all the animals in this wicked town. This would be like the Lord pardoning every single person and animal that lives in Rapid City, Aberdeen, and Brookings of South Dakota. Jonah was not just indifferent to the Lord's decision to be merciful. Jonah was exceedingly angry at a God who chooses to deliver forgiveness and pardon over fairness and equality.

Does anyone recognize this lady? Her picture portrays her as someone you might want as your grandmother. Does her name, Ida Mae Fuller, ring any bells for you? Ida was born in Vermont. She began her career as a schoolteacher, but later she worked until her retirement as a legal secretary. Ida was never married, and she had no children. She was affectionately called Aunt Ida by many. I will have to give the credit to my preaching professor Julie Smith for also teaching me about Ida. I, like most of you, have never heard of Ida Fuller before. She appears to be a nice lady, but as my professor pointed out, there is reason to be angry with Ida for the unfair benefits that she received. Ida Fuller was the first person in the United States to receive a Social Security check. Her check number was 00-000-001. She received this check on January 31, 1940. Ida had contributed to the Social Security Administration less than three years before getting this check. After this short period of time of contributing to her SS, Ida had paid in \$24.75. Ida's first check that she received was for \$22.54 when she turned 65 years of age. Ida got nearly every penny she paid into the system in the first check. To make matters even more unfair and unequal, Ida lived to be 100 years old and collected over \$22,000 after paying only a little over \$20. You and I know people who have paid thousands of dollars and never lived long enough to get a red cent. Does this make you angry? I doubt if it really does, and I have slept just fine after learning about Ida too.

I think one of the main reasons that now after learning about Ida and not getting mad is that we didn't know Ida. Unfairness really gets our goat, when we know the person, the group of people, the town or country that isn't getting the punishment they deserve. And worse yet, is that they might be getting favored. If we can keep people in the place we feel they should be, we are more likely to be like Jonah and happy

sitting under our shady bush. We would even smile a little more if we could see them suffer a little more. But when we see them prosper, just see how fast our emotions can switch.

It amazes me how little it can take to make the tide turn on how we feel about what is fair. This is one of the points Jesus makes in what has become known as the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. The monetary amount that causes the problem is one day's wage. This is not about someone who deserved to go to jail and win the lottery instead. The people in this parable agreed to work all day for a full day's wage and were happy as punch, until they saw people, they knew who had worked less time than they had and received the same reward. And what kind of a landowner would make sure that the workers that he hired first saw the unfairness as he paid out the wages. The landowner could easily have sealed the payment in the envelopes and encouraged the workers to keep what they had earned to themselves. But he didn't. He wanted everyone to know that he did not reward his workers based on the world's scales of fairness.

I remember when I served on the Tri-Valley School Board, we proposed a change of payment to staff that we knew was not going to be equitable to everyone. The intent was to encourage new or younger staff to pursue additional education with hopes that they would earn their master's degrees. We offered a relatively small amount of money to the latecomers to the teaching faculty, but we didn't give the teachers who had spent several years of their career a penny more. Since it wasn't a huge sum of money, the school board and administration thought it would be a good idea and all would be happy. The plan to reward some without giving to others failed miserably. I don't remember a time when I heard anger from faculty who we only knew as happy. We learned that this was not the time or place for unfairness.

The truth is that you and I will never achieve fairness and equality in everything or maybe even anything in this life. In some cases, this is for a good reason. I would not want to go to sporting events, knowing that no one is keeping score, and, in the end, no one will be named the winner. I silently keep track of the score the best I can when my grandkids are playing their first season of T-ball when there is plenty of grace granted as everyone gets to run around the bases without being called out and everyone makes it home. However, there are times when we could be happy to be merciful to our neighbors who receive benefits when they do little or nothing to deserve them but choose not to.

It is easy for me to find myself relating to the first workers of this parable who were the first picked to work in the vineyard. I must catch myself when I want to elevate myself above other Christians. I got good attendance rewards in Sunday School at Willow Creek. I didn't miss church very often and I didn't have to go there under duress from my parents. Some of you, like I might think, there must be a special place in heaven for Christians like me. That is until Jesus teaches us in this parable that there is nothing, we can do to earn his favor or status compared to anyone else.

This parable should be named just as we hear the parable begin, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner". The kingdom of heaven is not like or about the laborers in the vineyard. We are put in our rightful place knowing that it was Jesus who endured the burden of the day while he took all our sins from us. It was Jesus who has done all the work that we could never do. We can be happy that God chooses us despite our reluctance like Jonah demonstrated to not follow what Jesus has called us to do. We could be angry at God for being merciful to others, until we realize we are more like people we feel are undeserving of God's grace than we want to admit.

God has turned his anger from you today. With this good news for you, you and I can turn from our desires for equality and be thankful and happy that God is gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Amen

