

## Sunday September 21

### Readings

#### Jonah 3:10-4:11

**10** When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. **1** But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. **2** He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. **3** Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." **4** But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?" **5** Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. **6** Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. **7** But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. **8** When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." **9** But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." **10** But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. **11** But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

#### Psalm 145:1-8

**1** I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. **2** Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. **3** Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. **4** One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. **5** They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. **6** They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. **7** They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. **8** The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

#### Philippians 1:21-30

**21** For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. **22** If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! **23** I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; **24** but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. **25** Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, **26** so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. **27** Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel **28** without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God. **29** For it has been granted to you on behalf of

Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, **30** since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Prayer of the Day

Almighty and eternal God, you show perpetual loving kindness to us your servants. Because we cannot rely on our own abilities, grant us your merciful judgment, and train us to embody the generosity of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

## Matthew 20:1-16

**1** "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. **2** He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. **3** "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. **4** He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' **5** So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. **6** About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' **7** " 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' **8** "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' **9** "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. **10** So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. **11** When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. **12** 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' **13** "But he

answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' **14** Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. **15** Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' **16** "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

## **Sermon**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,  
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:  
Amen.

Equality is an incredibly tricky concept. We live in a nation whose foundational documents dictate that all men are created equal, but those equalities have been incredibly difficult for some to obtain. Women, racial minorities, and the LGBTQ community have had to fight – and all too often still must fight – to establish this sort equality within the United States.

Of course, the difficult part about realizing equality is that who are privileged must give up their advantages to which they are so accustomed. People in power rarely want to share that power,

much less empower others to the point of an equitable distribution. The same is true for people with money, people with authority, people with influence, people with just about anything. Equality is a challenge to those anyone who has an advantage.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus has something to say about equality, especially in relation to the community of faith, and that is this: Jesus tells us that regardless of how long our family has been here, or how much education we have, or how much money we give, we are all incredibly equal in the eyes of God's Kingdom.

He does this through the Parable of the Workers, where we hear that no matter how long anyone has worked, everyone receives a days' wages. Whether

they've worked only in the last few minutes twilight or have toiled since sunrise, all receive an equal portion.

Can't you just hear the voices of the workers who were hired first on that day? Tough, wiry farmhands who spent the entire day in the heat of the sun, toiling amongst the weeds and pest of the vineyard. Then, all of the sudden, when the workers are treated equally, these seasoned laborers turn into children, bickering about fairness. (WHINY) **THESE people only worked an hour, and you're paying them the same thing you're paying us? THAT'S NOT FAIR!**

Fortunately for us, we're much more evolved than this, right? We never need to have it our way. We never get petty with Jesus when he seems to expand his grace to newcomers on the scene. Thank

goodness we never say we deserve more influence in the church or more authority in faith because we've been here longer! Or, if we were honest with ourselves, we all too often identify with those who have worked in the field since the wee hours of the morn. When equality sets in, we feel slighted.

Part of the reality of being grandfathered – or grandmothered – in to the faith is that we end up like Jonah; frustrated with God for being so darn radical in his graciousness to new people, to new cultures, to newness itself. Because the kind of newness God brings is the kind that takes away our privilege.

We can all understand where Jonah is coming from, and in fact, we might identify a bit with Jonah. Jonah is sent to Ninevah, the capital city of the



Assyrian empire. The Assyrians are those who initially overthrew the Northern Kingdom of Israel. These are the people who burned their fields, destroyed their temple, invaded their homes, and then carried the Israelite people into exile. Jonah's land was desolate thanks to the Assyrians, and now the Lord has the gall to give them a chance at forgiveness, to give them equal standing with Jonah and the rest of God's chosen people? Jonah seems righteously indignant. Where is justice in this? Why do they deserve any sort of equality before the judgment seat of God? God sends a prophet who knows firsthand the kind of grace that belongs to the Lord, Jonah, and even Jonah can't comprehend what God is up to.

But there is justice in God's mission to Ninevah. Perhaps the problem is that we tend to equate justice with punishment. We assume that justice is about fairness. We want retribution. We want to see the wrongdoers punishment. Retribution sets out to give someone their just deserts, an eye for an eye kind of response.

But of course, we remember Jesus had no interest in this kind of justice. Instead, our Christ is much more concerned with restorative justice, an act that restores things to the way they ought to be. Restoration is the goal of God's justice, where we see prodigal children brought back into relationship rather than punished for their transgressions. So what

does this all mean? We need to reconsider what we think is just.

Because, you see, Christ wants to restore us to relationship not only with God, but to relationship with one another. There is no justice while divisions still remain. There is no justice without restoration to relationship. God is about tearing down the walls that divide us, even if we are the ones standing in the way of reconciliation. Our Creator wants all of creation to share in the joy of Jesus! Black AND white, gay AND straight, citizen AND immigrant, God has a vision for all people to share an equal part of God's kingdom, without exception. Equality is not about sameness! In fact, it is an incredible recognition that, though we are not the same, we are all loved with the

immaculate love of God. God is about uniting us in a way that recognizes the different parts of our identities, even as we are all given a new identity that takes precedent: children of God.

That's hard for us. We are the Jonah's who've been a part of the Kingdom for decades, and God's penchant for equality means the kingdom is constantly changing. The church that we grew up in is not the same church as today. The culture has changed around us. Life just doesn't seem fair.

Before I said that we were uncomfortable with God constantly offering grace to newcomers. But that's not exactly right, because here's the thing: they aren't actually new. We're just noticing them for the first time. Jonah's ultimate problem wasn't that

the Assyrians were new, but rather, that God finally made him meet face to face with the Assyrians as people with integrity, worthy of God's grace and forgiveness. Jonah had to consider, even though the Assyrians weren't the original chosen people of Israel, that God would choose them anyway, and make them an equal part of the kingdom. We must come to the same sort of awareness, that in the midst of a rapidly changing world, God is seeking to reconcile all things to himself, to bring all people into the Kingdom of God.

We must recognize that the call to the Gospel is a call to equality, and therefore a call away from our privilege. And here's the kicker. If we're honest with ourselves, we are workers who came into the mission

field knowing that God was all about this equality.

The Gospel has always been about setting us level with one another, looking sisters and brothers another in the eye, about setting us back into an equitable relationship with all of humanity. We have no excuse to expect more than that, to expect to receive more at the end of the day, because we are called to be one, in Christ.

So who are our Babylonians, those that we selfishly want God to abandon? Who are our workers who started late in the day, those that we want God to treat as less than us? Who do we have trouble welcoming as an equal in the Kingdom, as a sister or brother in the church? God has called us to become one across lines of race and sexuality, across lines of

income and culture. At the end of the day, we all receive the same reward – Christ. He is where our equality lies, and that kind of equality is heavenly.

Amen.

But God did not call us to stay static in our buildings while the world changes around us. We must remember that, through our baptisms, we are in the process of constant transformation, changing into the very image of God. In fact, transformation itself is part of the image of God. When we were in our state of deepest need, God did not stay the same, unmoved by our suffering, but moved from heaven to earth, from the Kingdom to the garden, and became human in every conceivable way. Rather than remain unchanged, God committed to change in order to widen the kingdom. God took on human form. God became equal with us! God willingly transformed in order to transfer grace to all people.



