

Pentecost 16, Proper 20-September 24, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton.

Jonah 3:10-4:11, Psalm 145:1-8, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

If I had to sum up all the readings today in one word it would be this: generosity!

Think of the whole Book of Jonah as an extended parable on obedience, struggle, self-centeredness and forgiveness. Jonah, in today's reading, is experiencing a failure of trust – he thinks he knows better than God how the people of Nineveh should be treated. After all Jonah's seen in terms of God's deliverance, he still wants to see punishment rather than forgiveness – And when God doesn't do that, then you can almost hear Jonah cry out "No, No, NO! Punishment for wrongs is the way things ought to be!" And culturally, that would be what would have happened. An eye for an eye is a proportional justice previously unknown; it used to be "you take my eye, I'll kill you!" Disproportionate justice. But now God generously expands the understanding of forgiveness so that there's no punishment at all, and Jonah doesn't like it one bit!

What we're witnessing is a brand new reality, and Jonah's having trouble adjusting. He can no longer depend on yesterday's certainties, but he doesn't have the flexibility to embrace the new situation.

On the pilgrimage of life, Jonah's learning, there are no guarantees, but plenty of adventures. You know, that's still true! But Jonah won't budge. To paraphrase in today's idiom he says that "It's not fair! After all I've done, this is how you repay me?" And then he throws a tantrum along the lines of "I'll show you! I'll just go and kill myself, and then how will you feel?!" Manipulation is not a new gadget in the human tool box!

Instead of being drawn in, God calmly offers Jonah a comparative lesson between the life and death of the bush and the life and possible death of the people of Nineveh. "My concerns are on a much larger scale," God says to him, "and anyway, isn't gifting forgiveness better than seeking retribution? This isn't the "fire and brimstone" God we meet elsewhere in the Old Testament, but a God more interested in relationship and willing to forgive! And by implication willing to forgive Jonah for running off in the other direction when commanded to go to Nineveh.

I think that has personal applications for all of us. One of the take-aways for me is the way we're being invited by this story to let go of our anger and trust in God's continual generosity.

Then there's Paul - I suppose you could sum up what he declares he believes at the front end of this passage like this: "The joy of faith overcomes the fear of death." I think that's especially remarkable because he's writing this from prison! It's also very generous! Paul's willing to set aside his greatest hope so that he can help others, help those he deeply cares for and wants to succeed: he want them to try and live up to their high calling, which includes standing together as a community, no matter how different they are and no matter what difficulties they face. So, he says, "live faithfully, live by God's grace, following God's ways, and the good work that God has begun in you will be brought to fullness." There's much generosity here, especially as Paul is writing this from prison – not a pleasant place to be in the 1st Century!

Matthew chooses Jesus words here to focus on generosity. Jesus' parable is an image of divine generosity. In the first century many people lived 'hand-to-mouth.' Everyone depended on that day's wage to feed their family. Yet for those who, through no fault of their own, were only hired at the end of

the day, an hourly rate would mean they received almost nothing. The consequence is obvious: their families would go hungry. That's still true today for a significant part of our planet's population, including many in this country. So the landowner's generous gift is literally about life. The parable is about God's generous gift to all of us that's figuratively life: new life.

There's also a flip side to this parable, the obvious one: that those who worked hard all day felt hard done by, felt that this wasn't just on the landowner's part. Like Jesus' listeners, we're being reminded that it's not for us to judge our standing by making comparisons with others, nor envy what they're gifted with - that sort of self-centered jealousy has no place in the Kingdom of God.

What we are being invited to do is to see that this generosity to all is the way of God's realm. We all stand in radical equality before God, but our individual needs will vary. Who are we to judge whether the sharing of God's largesse is right or not!

In the end, this is about grace: grace that's given to respond to our deepest needs, regardless of when or how we enter God's realm - in fact, "grace upon grace" as the introduction to John's gospel so eloquently proclaims.

I think one of the challenges of this parable for us is to think about the sorts of behavior that's appropriate, that's right, that's righteous, for people of faith, in this case in the context of generosity. That's one of the quests of our life of faith: figuring out what that behavior, those actions, looks like for each of us and for all of us in concrete situations, not just in theory.

Richard Rohr, in his book "falling upward" invites a reflection on the tasks that we as human beings must engage, of which the quest I just described is a part. He says this:

There is much evidence on several levels that there are at least two major tasks to human life. The first task is to build a strong "container" or identity; the second is to find the contents that the container was meant to hold. (Falling Upward, xiii)

As human beings we fail to thrive without a healthy experience in building a safe container, a solid identity. But we can never be fully whole without finding the contents that this container - our identity - is meant to hold. Our faith and today's readings invite us into this second task. Both Paul and Jesus offer us a vision of what our containers should hold as people of faith. Over the past few weeks we've heard about those contents, things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. Today there's another item to add to those contents: generosity.

And I think that, more importantly, the parables of the past two Sundays, both of Jesus and in the Book of Jonah, are also invitations into a spirituality for that second part of life, to a place - to a world - beyond the rules of fairness we were taught as part of creating that container; a world of overflowing generosity. That's a world where we discover that the things - even the people - that we thought possessively were ours never really existed; we never owned them. It's all a gift, they're each a gift, a generous, undeserved gift. In the end it's all "grace upon grace," it's all the undeserved generosity of our loving God to us.

That gift, those gifts, are also invitations to us to live generously, to forgive easily, to love quickly, and to celebrate always. May it be so for all of us.