

**The Lessons Appointed for  
Use on the  
Sunday closest to September**



**14**

**Proper 20**

**Year A**

**RCL**

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

**The Collect**

**The Collect**

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

**Jonah 3:10-4:11**

When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat un-

der it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, “It is better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?” And he said, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Then the LORD said, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about 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 many animals?”

Psalm 145:1-8

*Exaltabo te, Deus*

- 1 I will exalt you, O God my King, \*  
and bless your Name for ever and ever.
- 2 Every day will I bless you \*  
and praise your Name for ever and ever.
- 3 Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; \*  
there is no end to his greatness.
- 4 One generation shall praise your works to another \*  
and shall declare your power.
- 5 I will ponder the glorious splendor of your majesty \*  
and all your marvelous works.
- 6 They shall speak of the might of your wondrous acts,  
\*  
and I will tell of your greatness.
- 7 They shall publish the remembrance of your great  
goodness; \*  
they shall sing of your righteous deeds.
- 8 The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, \*  
slow to anger and of great kindness.

**Matthew 20:1-16**

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and

give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

## SERMON

Janis Joplin sang, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes-Benz”? Sounds stupid, when you put it that way, doesn’t it? A little sacrilegious. A little bit “Eeeewww”. But there is no shortage of TV preachers who will tell you that what God wants most of all is that you should have whatever your little heart desires.

Well, what’s wrong with that? Your Father in heaven has granted you the great privilege to approach Him in prayer. Why **shouldn’t** you ask for a new car? Of course, the answer is that you don’t **need** a Mercedes-Benz and nowhere are we taught, “Follow me and get a really sweet ride.” Asking God for the wrong things, though, **does** reveal important things about ourselves which, if we pay attention, will give us a great opportunity to journey more deeply into our relationship with God. In particular, contrasting those things we

ask of God with the obligations God imposes upon us, reveals how divided our minds are. We get ourselves “divided” over more than fancy automobiles. We get ourselves divided because our sinful, human natures demand a form of justice that is different than God’s forgiving Grace, and it messes us up, over and over.

Let me show you what I mean.

Jonah, you’ll remember, was directed by God to go to Nineveh and preach a message of repentance. Nineveh was located on the east bank of the Tigris, across the river from a place currently much in the news – Mosul, Iraq. Some of the suburbs of present-day Mosul are actually built over some of the ruins of Nineveh.

For God to send Jonah to Nineveh, in itself, was a remarkable thing, because Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and Assyria, to the Jews, was pretty much the equivalent of every bad thing that ever happened. As-

syria made its living by invading other countries. They were basically land pirates, and very good at it. Their empire stretched over the entire northern fertile crescent.

The two important things about them from the Jewish perspective were that they were not worshipers of God, and that they attacked, sacked and carried off the “ten lost tribes” of Israel from the northern kingdom in 723 b.c.e. Going to their capital city and preaching a message of repentance to the Lord doesn’t sound to me like a great idea. It sounds to me like a good way to get yourself killed. I’m trying to think of a contemporary parallel. The best I can come up with would be for one of us to go to North Korea with a similar message. Surprisingly, though, I don’t think Jonah was afraid of being killed. Jonah was afraid of being successful! He was afraid that Nineveh would heed his words and repent,

escaping punishment. Jonah wished no good on the people of Nineveh, so when he finally DID as God directed, and went to Nineveh, the message he preached was not the message of repentance God had instructed him to preach, that is, to “cry out” for the sins of Nineveh. Instead, Jonah preached judgment.

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

Jonah went to the home of his peoples’ worst enemy, and told that enemy that judgment had been entered against them and their future was sealed. Contrast that message with the one he was supposed to be delivering – a message of the need for repentance, and you can see how different were the desires of Jonah and God.

In my mind’s eye, I see old Jonah with a bell in his hand (I don’t know where the bell came from. That’s

just how I see him) going through the streets of Nineveh, calling out in a loud voice, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!” then adding, *soto voce*, “Good! You just wait til God gets here. You’re going to get what’s coming to you now.” Jonah built himself a booth, a *succoth*, sat himself down and waited for God to get busy with the smiting they had coming. So, what happened?

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles. . . All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

Old Jonah was flat out flummoxed. “After all I’ve

been through ... I got swallowed by a fish! Do you have any idea what the inside of a fish smells like? And I don't even want to talk about getting vomited up on the sand. Ever! And you're going to let them get away with it?"

That's why I said that the things we ask of God reveal a lot about ourselves. In place of Nineveh, imagine our friend with the bad haircut in North Korea. Imagine that God sent you to "cry out" against his threatening behavior so that he might repent, then imagine that he did repent. Would you be satisfied by that, or would you prefer that he be hanged from the highest gibbet so that all the world could see? God's words show us how far we stand from God's justice.

When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had

said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

The things we ask of God reveal a lot about ourselves if we can just muster the wit to listen to ourselves. Jonah has a very human need to see bad people suffer. God doesn't celebrate suffering. Jonah seeks punishment. God seeks repentance and reconciliation. God's action in forgiving even the people of Nineveh because they repented offended Jonah to his core. It offends just about everybody. We have a human need to see the scales balanced. Do right, do well. Do wrong, get punished. Any suggestion to the contrary flies in the face of our sense of justice. Fair is fair, and we want, we **need**, God's Creation to be fair. The problem is that "fair" in God's scales is so very different from "fair" in our scales.

We're now down to one of the most important

lessons I will preach to you. I want you to hear it, and take it home with you. It is this: When you and I think about sin, we think of it in terms of someone doing something wrong. The burglar who steals has sinned. The murderer who kills has sinned. Sin viewed in that manner means that if I do not murder or steal I am NOT a sinner. That's the most dangerous idea you could come up with for it allows us to appoint ourselves administrators of God's justice. We're just not up to it. I spent more than 25 years playing whack-a-mole with God's children who had misbehaved. Let me tell you: if the goal is restoration, our way doesn't work.

Sin isn't doing wrong things. Doing wrong things is the fruit of sin, but the actual sin is in our failure to recognize our sins, our failure to realize how far our desires are from the goals for which we were designed by God. I don't like the idea of a "Satan", but that's for an-

other sermon. Nevertheless, Satan doesn't come to us in a red union suit. He comes to us dressed in everything we ever wanted. Our sin is that we never measure those things we ask of God against God's justice. No matter how gently we go through life, no matter how faithfully we attend church, all have fallen short of the Glory of God. ALL are guilty, as guilty as Nineveh.

God's example is that of a lover, wooing each sinner into an ever-closer relationship with Him, no matter what they have done in the past. When we seek the suffering of sinners, when we demand harsh punishment for criminals, we expose the sin that is keeping us from God. Our need to see evil punished and good rewarded is the blinding sin that stands in the way of the relationship we could have with Jesus Christ. In God's justice, it is not important what you have done. The only thing that is important is that you repent of your sins, accept

His forgiveness, and turn your life – heart, head and hand – to the ministry He has given you.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

I'm much impressed with the writings of Bishop N.T. Wright. In his book "The Day the Revolution Began", he sets out his position:

**The human problem is not so much "sin" seen as the breaking of moral codes—though that, to be sure, is part of it, ... but rather idolatry and the distortion of genuine humanness it produces. These two mistakes go together, reinforcing the basic heaven-and-earth dualism that continues to haunt Western theology.**

**The "goal" is not "heaven," but a renewed human vocation within God's renewed creation. This is what every biblical book from Genesis on is pointing toward.**

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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