

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*  
**Sunday closest to September 21**

Year A  
Proper 20  
RCL



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

**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 under 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 ap-

pointed 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 Page 801, BCP**

*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

In an idle moment, have you ever thought about what “everybody knows?” Everybody knows that you tighten a screw clockwise and you loosen it counter-clockwise. Righty-Tighty, Lefty-Loosey. Everybody knows that. Interestingly enough, Jesus never commented upon it, and you can search the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and never find any mention of it whatsoever. In spite of this lack of Biblical authority, there are few items of belief which we hold in more intimate closeness than Righty-Tighty, Lefty-Loosey. I remember reading of a focus group hired by a toothpaste tube designer to try his new design. The designer’s idea was that we shouldn’t have to screw and unscrew the top of the toothpaste tube. He designed a flip lid. Over half the focus group returned their tube to him, saying it was broken. They were trying to unscrew it. You want to

bring this nation to its knees? Just put left-handed threads on something important. We'll be running naked through the jungle hitting rabbits in the head with rocks for supper in a generation.

The things that everybody knows are more important than just how to tighten a bolt. They are the secret passwords we use to identify the members of our tribe. People who violate these things therefore aren't members of our tribe and might be dangerous. They might take some of the tribe's food! They might look different! "Me and my tribe" might have made sense when we were running around naked in the jungle hitting rabbits in the head with rocks, but does it make sense in this land of plenty? Really? There aren't enough rabbits to go round?

So, what are these things that everybody knows, these shibboleths that protect the tribe? Those of us of a



certain age recall the hue, cry and general sense of alarm occasioned by the choice of hair length by the boys of the sixties. At the time, everybody knew that boys had short hair and girls had long hair. Of all the things to be alarmed about, the length of someone else's hair would not make my short list. Nonetheless, it seemed for a time as if people thought that hair length was a measure of how close we were to the apocalypse.

Here's another one: everybody knows that God helps those who help themselves. The Prosperity Gospel that the TV preachers shout at us teaching us that God wants us to have a Rolls-Royce is founded on this idea. It even bolsters the American myth of the rugged individualist. I'd hazard a guess that 95% of the people who tell me this believe it is Biblical. It's not, of course. It comes from one of Aesop's fables, Hercules and the Wagoner.

A carter was driving a wagon along a country lane, when the wheels sank down deep into a rut. The rustic driver, stupefied and aghast, stood looking at the wagon, and did nothing but utter loud cries to Hercules to come and help him. Hercules, it is said, appeared and thus addressed him: “Put your shoulders to the wheels, my man. Goad on your bullocks, and never more pray to me for help, until you have done your best to help yourself, or depend upon it you will henceforth pray in vain.”

You might well think that’s good advice, but it’s not Jesus’ approach to human distress, and you really need to know that. Those who quote to me that God helps those who help themselves inevitably do so in the context of explaining to me why we as a society have no duty to care for those who are in the dawn of life, the children; for those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; for those who are in the shadows of life; the sick, the hopeless and the handicapped. It’s become what ev-

everybody knows, and attributing it to Jesus just gives it a polish of authority, however unjustly.

The census bureau tells us that one out of six Americans lives in poverty. One out of three of those Americans living in poverty is a child. Jesus tells us over and over that the kingdom path is the way of a servant. Jesus reminds us that our focus is to be on the needs of those about us. What everybody knows is that unless we seal our borders, tighten our fences and withdraw into gated communities of prosperity, the tribes to the south will come and eat all our rabbits. The way of the world isn't the path of a servant, but the pursuit and capture of resources. If you had worked for Lehman Brothers and refused to make poorly-researched, high-risk investments, you wouldn't have made money, and if you didn't make money, you wouldn't have worked for Lehman Brothers very long. I might add that if you were Commonwealth'-

s Attorney and decided that God hadn't handed over to you the questions of life and death, you wouldn't be Commonwealth's Attorney very long, either.

This is the tension that rips the heart of Christians living in the world. The world demands one thing. Christ demands another. The heart of every Christian is stretched across a chasm between me and my tribe on one side, and the compassionate heart of Christ on the other. This is how it must be, for the way of Jesus is inclusive, while the way of the world is exclusive. We chant “me and my tribe”. God cries out, “My children!” We worry that someone who doesn’t share our group understandings might do something dangerous. We fear the stranger and seek to exclude him. Jesus has already suffered the worst that can happen to him, and answers with a teaching of inclusion.

To ease our suffering, we very often squint our eyes

and try to read into Scripture permission to do that which the forces of the world demand of us. That's the mechanism behind inviting one of Aesop's Fables into Holy Writ when we start thinking of ways to balance our budget by reducing aid to the most vulnerable and therefore least powerful politically. This is made easier because as a nation we revere the Bible, but we don't read it.

If I say “Jonah” you’ll think “whale”, but the text says nothing about a whale. It’s a “great fish” and whales aren’t fishes – they’re mammals. The fish, as important as it is, isn’t the point of the story of Jonah. When we hear “Jonah”, we should think of Nineveh. Jonah's story begins with Nineveh.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

For us, “Nineveh” is one of those Bible words. For the people in the story of Jonah, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and there are hardly words strong enough to describe what a miserable bunch of trolls the Assyrians were. Their national strategy was to conquer their neighbors, drain the goodness from them, then abandon the husk and go conquer someone else. Telling an Israelite to go to Nineveh and preach against it would be like telling a rabbi in 1942 to “Go to the great city of Berlin and preach against it”. Jonah was having none of it.

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Here’s the first thing that Jonah has to teach us. He was called by God for a specific purpose, just as each of

us has been. Instead of doing what you know he's going to wind up doing anyway, he first tried to run away from God. This is where our Biblical illiteracy stands us in good stead. God demands one thing, the world, and our own wishes, demand another. What to do? What to do? Where can we hide from God? Perhaps in things we graft onto Holy Writ? Like my friend I told you about once who thought "To thine own self be true" was "in the Bible", you can imagine Jonah thinking, "I must be true to myself and myself wants to get me to Tarshish!" If you had been a Lehman Brothers employee you might have told yourself, "I must support my family! I must be a good team player and invest in high-risk stocks even though I can see that the end result will be a melt-down and great pain for people who did nothing to deserve it." The capacity of the human mind to find good reasons for doing the wrong thing is limitless. Therefore, we

imagine we can hide from God.

After his encounter with the great fish, and the added indignity of being vomited up as something unworthy of digestion, Jonah did what he was told to do in the first place – he went to Nineveh and preached against it. To his great astonishment, Nineveh believed him!

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh:



“By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened.

God is going to let them get away with it, just because they repented! Everybody knows that if you do wrong, if you violate the laws of God and man, the fury of God and man must descend upon you. The wages of sin are death. Everybody knows that. You want to bring this nation to its knees, just don't punish the law breakers and we'll all be running around naked in the jungle

hitting rabbits in the head with rocks in a generation.  
Righty-Tighty, Lefty-Loosey!

Jonah is MAD! He said to God

“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.”

Get that! Rather than offering forgiveness and celebrating the repentance of one who had done wrong, this boy would rather die. If God is going to go around pardoning people who repent, Jonah wants no part of it. He'd rather be dead than to live in a world where there are second chances, where God is gracious and merciful. Lock 'em up and throw away the key!

Note, also, that this is NOT what he said when he

was in his own country. He tried to hide from God in his own country. He tried to be faithless to the job given him. He's as big a sinner as the people of Nineveh, but he can't see it. He is mad because he hasn't seen the other sinners punished, and everybody knows that the bad guys get it in the end. Jonah sits down to see what God will do in response to his outburst. He did what he was told to do, and he's entitled to see the fury of the Lord poured out on the heads of the sinners. And if it doesn't, where is justice? You can't just do anything you want then avoid your just desserts just by saying you're sorry, can you?

The Emperor Constantine, the Roman Emperor who made Christianity the state religion of Rome three hundred years after Jesus, remained himself unbaptized until just before his death in May 337 c.e. The theory is that he wanted all his sins washed clean and until he

was near death, he hadn't finished committing them. This drives everybody nuts. The wages of sin are death. Says so, right in the Scriptures. How can you wait until you're on your deathbed, get baptized, and expect to go to heaven?

In our passage from Matthew today, the landowner pays the workers who worked only an hour the same as those who worked all day long. The earlier workers get mad. Everybody knows that's not fair. The landowner replies:

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?

Well ... yes. Jonah is envious because God is being generous with the residents of Nineveh, their children

and their animals. If God is generous, then the followers of God are to be generous, and Jonah has already said that he'd rather die than to be generous to sinners.

Which side of the chasm do we stand on – the side that's labeled “me and my tribe” or the side labeled “God's grace?” How do we stretch ourselves over that chasm?

We fill our jails with hopeless people. Believe me. I've been there! When we release them, it is with a felony on their record. When they seek a job, that felony record translates to “No job for you.” With no job, they can't support themselves. With a felony conviction, they are not qualified for public housing. The hopeless have been deprived of what little hope remained, and we? We sit with Jonah in his booth:

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself

there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

With Jonah, we await their destruction and when it comes, as inevitably it must for we have left them no other outcome, we celebrate our choices about them. “See?” we say. “I told you they were no-good!”

All these things everybody knows identify us as members of the world. God’s assumptions are different and to be identified with God’s community, we must give up what everybody in the world knows, and hold tight unto ourselves the teachings that identify us as members of God’s tribe.

Would that we were as generous to our brothers and sisters as God is. Would that we could see our own sins as clearly as we fancy we can see the sins of others. Would that we could stop seeing ourselves as saints to their sinners, and start seeing ourselves as servants to

the needs of God's creation.

AMEN

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

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