

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost • September 24, 2017

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

In the Lutheran tradition, we're fond of saying that we're saved by grace. We talk about grace a lot. It shows up on our bulletin covers. On our churches. On our banners. Grace is so ubiquitous that it kind of feels like elevator music. It hums along in the background, unintrusive but pleasant. Constant without being demanding.

The way the biblical authors talk about grace is very different. If you look for what scripture has to say about grace, the first thing you'll notice is that it doesn't appear to say all that much. The word "grace" is used about three or four times in the Old Testament and about three or four times in the gospels. But the biblical authors have a different way of talking about grace. Which isn't giving us airtight definitions but telling us stories. Stories about God's love and compassion that people haven't done anything to deserve. If you go through the Bible looking for the word "grace" with big flashing lights around it, you'll be disappointed by how rarely you see it. But if you look for stories of undeserved generosity, you'll see it on every page.

Some of these stories are what you would expect. God gives the Israelites food in the desert. Jesus heals people. They're relatively straightforward stories of God's grace. God's grace is reassuring, comforting, uplifting.

But today's readings paint a very different picture of grace. When the people in today's stories encounter grace, they don't feel reassured by it. They don't feel comforted by it. They certainly don't feel uplifted by it. They feel scandalized by it. Grace feels shocking to them. If today's readings make you want to say Wait a second, then they're working the way they should be.

In today's reading from the Hebrew Bible, we get the story of Jonah. Jonah was a prophet who knew all about God. He was the kind of person who could dazzle you with his knowledge of scripture. His theology was impeccable. Some Biblical scholars think that Jonah was based on a prophet who took messages to the king. The king would call Jonah in ask him how God thought he was doing, and Jonah would say, "I had a vision and God says you're doing so good." And the king would say, "I don't know what it is, but I really like this prophet." So he had a pretty good gig.

And then one day, God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the people there to repent. But while God was calling Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah didn't really feel called to go to Nineveh. Because Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the empire that obliterated Israel. The Ninevites were the sworn enemies of Israelites like Jonah. So this isn't going to be a receptive audience to an Israelite like Jonah. And on the off chance that the Ninevites are receptive to this message, Jonah doesn't want to be responsible for helping his enemies. These are the people least deserving of God's mercy, so Jonah wants absolutely no part of it. There's no good outcome here.

So when God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, Jonah says, "Yea. But no. I was feeling more called to Tarshish." Tarshish was all the way across the Mediterranean Sea. Probably somewhere in southern Spain. "It's beautiful this time of year," Jonah thought. "The people aren't our enemies. That really feels like a better fit to me." So Jonah hops on a boat to go to Tarshish. And after God intervenes with a storm and a whale, Jonah realizes he can't sneak off and that God isn't going to let him off the hook until he goes to Nineveh.

So Jonah walks into a city poised to reject him, persecute him, throw him out of town. But he also knows he can't just leave again. So, resigned to his fate, Jonah makes a very short speech. In Hebrew, it's only five words. "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Like, I'm just going to do the minimum required here so I can go back to my old job.

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And the funniest thing happens. The Ninevites believe him. They proclaim a fast and put on sackcloth. Sackcloth was what you put on to show your remorse or grief over something you had done. Someone tells the king and the king trades his robes for sackcloth and his throne for a pile of ashes. He proclaims that they need to repent so hard that even the animals need to put on sackcloth. Yesterday, Nineveh was the embodiment of nationalistic violence and evil. Today, the king, the Ninevites, and all the animals are walking around the city covered in sackcloth.

Usually prophets spend years trying to convince people to repent. They're harassed, persecuted, shunned. If they are ever vindicated, it's years after they've died before people realize they were right. But not Jonah. Jonah walks into Nineveh, mumbles five words, and the whole city repents immediately. And when God sees what the Ninevites are doing, God decides to forgive them. That's where our reading starts today.

The Ninevites are happy that God has decided not to punish them. God is happy the Ninevites have changed their ways. And Jonah? How is Jonah, the most effective preacher of all time, doing? Jonah is livid. Jonah is furious. "O Lord," Jonah rages, "This is exactly what I said would happen. This is why I tried to go to Tarshish in the first place." And then Jonah borrows the words from the Psalms to complain about God. "Because I know," he rages, "that you're a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." And that's perfectly fine when you're dealing with me, but not when you're dealing with them. And then the kicker. Jonah in an overdramatic fit, says, "It is better for me to die than to live." If living means seeing those people be forgiven, I would rather die. After Jonah says that he would rather die than see the Ninevites be forgiven, God asks why Jonah is so angry. But Jonah is so angry at this perceived injustice, that he doesn't even respond. He goes outside the city to a hill so he can sulk.

Another way to phrase Jonah's complaint is that these people don't deserve grace. To which God would surely respond, "You're right. They don't. No one does. No one deserves grace." But that doesn't stop us from protesting like Jonah whenever someone else is shown mercy who we believe is undeserving. Because we want people to be held to account. It's why we make it so hard for people leaving incarceration to reintegrate in the community.¹ It's what leads us to deport Dreamers to countries they have no memory of.² It's why we feel so comfortable distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving poor.³ Because the idea of an undeserving person being shown mercy drives us crazy. Because we want justice. We want fairness. Because we want what we deserve.

If you want what you think you deserve, then grace will annoy you to no end. Because, like Jonah, when other people receive God's grace, you'll always be trying to figure out who got more. Even if you get a good shake, there will be someone who got an even better one. And instead of being grateful for what you've received, you'll be arguing with God like Jonah, wondering why people didn't get what you thought they deserved.

Jesus makes a similar point in today's parable about a landowner and her workers in the field. The landowner hires a group of workers at nine and agrees to pay them a fair wage. And a

¹ "The Church and Criminal Justice: Hearing the Cries," *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, August 17, 2013, http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Criminal_JusticeSS.pdf.

² "ELCA presiding bishop responds to DACA announcement," *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*, September 5, 2017, <https://elca.org/News-and-Events/7898>.

³ Annie Lowrey, "The People Left Behind When Only the 'Deserving' Poor Get Help," *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/05/the-people-who-are-left-behind-when-only-the-deserving-poor-get-help/528018>.

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couple hours later she realizes she needs more workers, so she goes to hire more at noon, three, and five. And at the end of the day, she decides to pay them all for a full day's work, regardless of how long they worked.

Notice that the landowner hasn't shafted the nine o'clock crowd. They're getting the square deal they were promised. The landowner isn't being stingy. No, the landowner is being generous with other people. But the nine o'clock crowd, the ones who have been there all day, protest, "These workers worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." Like Jonah, the fool on the hill, they watch others receive mercy and say, "They don't deserve it. What possible reason could you have for being so generous with these people?" But the landowner, of course, has no reason to be so generous to the afternoon hires. She isn't being generous because of who they are. She's being generous because of who she is.

For Jonah and that nine o'clock crowd, God's way of generosity is shocking, almost offensive. And it is! It's a level of generosity that totally upends the way we see the world. Jesus says that it's as if the first were last and the last were first. A generosity that doesn't just improve the situation of a few but radically transforms it for everyone.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say that "God is like a landowner who went out to hire laborers." Jesus says "the Kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner who went out to hire laborers." Which means that we're part of this story too. God's way of generosity is our way. Embodying God's mercy isn't just something we watch Jesus do. It's something we do, too. That's why our stewardship committee selected "Living Faithfully, Giving Generously" as our fall stewardship theme. Because God's generosity allows us to be generous to others. Like the landowner in the vineyard, giving of ourselves without considering whether it's deserved or whether our generosity is going to be rewarded. Because if the grace we proclaim and embody as a church isn't transformative, disruptive, and counter-cultural enough to give people pause, then we haven't gone far enough.

We reaffirm that every week in the Lord's Prayer when we pray that God's will would be done. That God's way of generosity would be our way. That our community would be a little more like the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus talks about. Because when we learn to see others the way God sees them, when we respond to God's generosity not by protesting but by rejoicing, life is truly "on earth as it is in heaven."

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