

THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 24, 2023

JONAH 3:10–4:11 | PSALM 145:1-8 | PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30 | MATTHEW 20:1-16

The first workers to the vineyard and the prophet Jonah have at least one thing in common: they're mad as hell, and they're not going to take it anymore. Many of us know the feeling. It seems like many people are walking around with their hands clenched in anger. If you've recently been in an airport, gone to a hospital, ordered a sandwich at a deli, worked out at a gym, or—let's be honest, done basically anything anywhere—you've probably seen someone having an angry outburst. And God help you if you've been on the receiving end of one of these encounters.

To be sure, anger isn't an inherently bad emotion. When Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the Temple, presumably he had some feeling of anger. If you read the prophets like Micah and Amos, they're often frustrated that the people of God seem unable to get angry about anything. "They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals," they tell us, but everyone just shrugs it off. Sometimes anger can be justified.

The more substantive question is what we get angry about. Today's readings give us two examples of people getting angry. But unlike Jesus, Amos, and Micah, they're people getting mad about all the wrong things.

First, we heard the ending of the Jonah story. The beginning of this story is the well-known part about Jonah trying to escape God's call to go to Nineveh and ending up in a whale. But after getting spat up on shore, Jonah begrudgingly goes and tells the people to repent. And—plot twist!—the people do. They change their ways, and God, we're told, "changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them."

You would expect that Jonah would take this as an unexpected win. This is better than things usually go for the prophets, so take a victory lap. But how does Jonah respond? He gets angry. I think it helps here to imagine Jonah less as a prophet you'd see in stained glass and more as someone who just asked to speak with the manager. Jonah complains, "I *knew* that you are a gracious God and merciful, *slow* to anger, and *abounding* in 'steadfast love,' and ready to *relent* from punishing... please take my life from me, for it is better for me to *die* than to live."

Jonah does something surprising here. He takes positive attributes of God (i.e., gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love), and says that these are actually negative characteristics. Because they mean that God isn't fair. Jonah has been doing what God told him to do this whole time—with the exception of the escape to Tarshish—and now these Ninevites have a deathbed conversion and get the same treatment? It makes him angry. How angry? Angry enough to die.

We heard a similar story in today's gospel reading. Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner goes out to hire workers to work in his vineyard throughout the day. And—another plot twist!—at the end of the day, he decides to just pay everyone the same wage no matter how long they've been there.

When the early hires get to collect their wages, they start complaining to the landowner. The complaint is not that they've been underpaid, or that the landowner changed their agreement. Their complaint is this. "You have made them equal to us." It's easy to imagine Jonah saying the exact same thing.

It would be easy to sum up the message of these stories as Stop Complaining So Much. But before these are stories about our behavior, they are stories about God's character. In the Jonah story, God offers

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the Ninevites, who everyone has written off as irredeemable, another chance to change their ways. In Jesus's parable, the landowner keeps going out to hire workers to come and work in the vineyard.

In both stories, God gives opportunities for life and sustenance and flourishing beyond what we expect or even consider reasonable. Jonah thought the mission to the Ninevites wasn't just difficult but a waste of time. *These people?* And when the landowner goes to hire workers at five, it seems like he's less concerned with how much they work than with just giving them something to do. *Why are you all just standing around all day?* Even when we've stopped paying attention or stopped caring or stopped noticing, God keeps on giving.

And because God is ever-giving, we are ever-receiving. As Luther put it on his death bed, "the truth is, we are beggars."¹ "Beggars" isn't the language we would use today, but we can say that we are always recipients of God's mercy. We never own it or possess it. We don't earn it or deserve it. We receive it anew every day as a gift.

And that changes how we see Jonah and the first hires in these stories. The problem with these characters is not that they are angry. It's that they have forgotten that they, too, are dependent on God's abundant giving. They believe the grace God has shown them is earned. And so when they see God being generous with someone else—someone they believe hasn't put in the time or the work—they protest. "You made them equal to us."

The result isn't just people who are wrong or misguided, but people who are, in a much deeper way, sort of pitiful. They are so turned in on their own self-righteousness and the merits of their own efforts that they see goodness and mercy and generosity entering the world, and their response is to protest. In Jonah's case, to say that it would literally be better to die than to live with God being generous to other people.

It is so easy for us to go through life like Jonah and the first hires. As a series of exchanges and trades and deals. To take our blessings and lucky breaks and privileges, and to interpret them as reflections of our character. To sort the world into deserving and undeserving. And to see any generosity shown to the latter as an attack on our supposed deservingness.

But God doesn't deal with us according to our merits and achievements. God deals with us in accordance with God's character. Which, as Jonah so helpfully reminded us, is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And so when we start to divide the world into the deserving and undeserving, makers and takers, up-and-coming and lost causes, we are mostly just flattering ourselves. As Dorothy Day once put it, "The gospel takes away our right... to discriminate between the deserving and undeserving poor." We are all undeserving of grace. But in Jesus Christ, God is always giving.

And so whenever we gather at Christ's table, we come not with resumes and bank statements and trophies but with empty hands. Those empty hands are the posture of faith. Because they remind us that we don't achieve life for ourselves. We receive it. As we gather at Christ's table, we remember that we have not earned God's favor, but we are given it anyway.

And sent forth from the table to love and serve, we go not just with open hands, but with open hearts, too. So that whenever we encounter God's generosity and goodness in the world, particularly those our society considers to be "undeserving," we can respond not with the angry laments of Jonah but with the joyous words of Christ: thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

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¹ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Fortress Press, 2009), 195.