

That Which Is Not Ours  
Matthew 20.1-16 and Jonah 3.10-4.11  
September 24, 2017  
Pentecost +16A  
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Last week's worship ended just like it does almost every single week. I walked down the aisle and spoke those last words, "May the Lord be gracious unto you and give you peace now and forevermore. Amen." Olga began to play the organ. Then I looked up to see Nancy Sanders waiting for me with the curious words, "We have protesters." We hurried to the big picture window in the Harris Room at the rear of the sanctuary, and sure enough—we had our first protesters. One man rather small, wearing a hat, holding a video camera. The other possibly a ZZ Top fan or a Santa Clause enthusiast. The sign he was spinning around was clear—we could all repent or we could all prepare for a fiery eternity.

Most of you opted to exit the building by other doors or avoid interaction with these gentlemen as you left for the day while just a handful decided to engage directly with curiosity and kindness. Yes, we laughed. Yes, the unfortunate sign he was waving needed a copy editor as it implied that they, perhaps, were meeting us all in hell, and that's a rather confusing message to send when attempting to frighten people into heaven.

I also ached for those of us who have received that message before and worried, even for just a moment, if the men might be telling the truth. Do we love and welcome too many people here? Is God's love small and particular? Are we getting it wrong? I ache for those who have felt the pain of this message before, just as I had spoken a mere 20 minutes before: some of us in this room have been on the receiving end of spiritual abuse in the church. Yet nevertheless, you have miraculously, by the grace of God, stuck with the church and found a way to study and worship and live out what you know to be true even though someone has told you it couldn't be true for you. I am convinced that the two men who visited us are recipients of that same spiritual abuse just as they perpetuate the same message of terror.

When I see them as fully human, as brothers, as made in the image of God, the lens of compassion helps me see not just how much anger but also how much fear they carry. How much anxiety that God is ready to hate us all at any and every turn. And I believe just as God sat with Jonah beneath wilted bush, surely God sits with them. Surely God is at work whispering, "Do not be afraid. I can love them and love you. My love only

multiplies. There will never be a shortage. May you know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ Jesus.”

At its best, their message is the same as many prophets, including the reluctant prophet Jonah—repent and believe. Change direction, return to the path of God, believe that God is at work in this world and be part of that work. Now where we disagree, and where I think they are speaking from the trauma of spiritual abuse, is who can be on the path of God and just how God is at work in this world. In the story of Jonah, he has no interest in speaking to the people of Ninevah. The people of Ninevah have been oppressive and cruel to his people for a long time. Why would he go there? And why would God care about them? And how could God possibly love them? How many of us carry this question within us: If God’s love is with me, how can God’s love also be with them? Nevertheless, even reluctantly, Jonah is a really effective prophet. The people listen to what he says about who God is and how God is at work in the world, and they actually do repent—changing direction, turning onto the path of God. And God sees them and doesn’t bring them harm. God sees them and changes his mind.

Meanwhile, Jonah finds a perch to sit and wait, just certain God will smite them all. But God doesn’t. God sees Jonah there, too, and makes a bush grow to give him shade and save him from his discomfort. Jonah is happy about the bush but not happy about his effective preaching or the city filled with the knowledge of God. He wanted those “others” to be destroyed by their wickedness. So much so that when God destroys the source of Jonah’s comfort, Jonah is more concerned for the bush than he ever was for the people of Ninevah.

Michael Chan beautifully comments, “Just as the giant fish is commissioned to place Jonah’s feet back on the path of the prophet, so the wind, the worm, and the weed are commissioned to place Jonah back on the path of compassion...But the human heart clings to bitterness like a dog to a fleshy bone. It takes root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than forgive, cling to pride than embrace mercy. We never know, in fact, how Jonah responds to Yhwh’s question. The matter is left completely open-ended, without response and without resolve -- and this may be purposeful.

Whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: the Ninevites are not the only ones pursued by Yhwh’s mercy. **God stays with Jonah, the bitter and unforgiving prophet, extending mercy to the merciless and compassion to the one whose heart is set on wrath.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2011](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2011)

How curious to me when the people of God are more committed to the wrath of God than God seems to be. We move to the Gospel lesson for today and find a parable as answer to questions the disciples have posed in the previous two chapters of Matthew—who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven? What reward will there be for us who gave up everything to follow you? Jesus then tells this parable of the landowner who hires day laborers throughout the day and pays them each for a full day's wage whether they've earned it or not. Now commenters and scholars don't all agree on how to read this story, as is common with many of Jesus' parables. We can certainly revisit this later and decide together if we might change our minds about the story's meaning. Today I'm going to let it stand as an image of God's abundant generosity.

Karoline Lewis writes that the parable allows us the "chance to look into the eyes of God," as we ask ourselves, "What is at the heart of God? What will you see? Well, at least according to this parable, you will see generosity. Sheer generosity. And, according to this parable, we may not like what we see.

Because in the end, sheer generosity? Unexplainable, unfathomable, generosity? For no reason at all? No way we can get our heads around that. Why? What's so hard? Because while we want to believe in generosity, what it is and what it represents, we can't. I think we have a fundamental discomfort with, even a suspicion of, generosity," she continues. "Here's the rub of this parable. That generosity is not something to be understood. And that we have an inherent resistance in receiving generosity. Because our human nature is then to anticipate a quid pro quo situation; to assume that we did something to deserve this generosity."<sup>2</sup>

I feel like this is the point at which Pastor Shawn Anglim of First Grace UMC in Mid-City instructs the congregation to turn to your neighbor and say, "God loves you!" Then turn to your other neighbor and say, "And there's nothing you can do about it!"

The love of God we know and experience is not ours alone. The generosity and abundance of God we are so fortunate to glimpse is not ours alone. Maybe the street preachers would be more effective if they shouted in their megaphones, "God loves you! And there's nothing you can do about it!" Are we prepared to extend that love which is not ours alone to those we deem unlovable? We do a pretty great job of loving each other in here. We extended some love to the street preachers last week who were rather convinced we're all going to hell. How far can we go with the love of God? Can we stretch to the abusers of theology who preach a tiny God ready to

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3340>

destroy? Can we stretch as far as the ones we know who have spoken cruelly to us? At what point might the love of God, the abundant generosity of God's grace, become so offensive that we'd rather sit beside Jonah and pout than be surprised and delighted by the endless expansion of God's heart? How far can our imaginations stretch when we consider together how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ Jesus?

Karoline Lewis, "I am not convinced that we have the capacity to live out generosity in its truest form, a generosity that cannot be defined or determined by assessable or computable reciprocity. Yet we know and experience these realities. So well. The need for generosity as both received and extended. The desire for generosity sensed as unmerited and unexpected. The urge to be generous to others that does indeed come from our very soul that knows the truth about God. So, we can try. We can tap into that sense of generosity as an extension of the welcome and hospitality and love and abundance we have experienced in God's urgent advances to be in relationship with us. Even if fleeting, perhaps we can extend generosity, not so much for the sake of ourselves, but for the sake of the other who might then get to see into the eyes of God and get a glimpse of God's very heart and soul."

May we come to know the generous love of God deep in our bones.

May we know that this generous love is not ours to hoard.

May we extend the generous love of God to every neighbor and stranger, kind and cruel alike.

May we believe that God is present and at work, bidden or unbidden, in ways that will shock and surprise us.

May we lean into that surprise and come to know together the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of the love that breathed the world into being, the love that placed its image in you, the love that extends to every corner of this world we know, sitting and resting alongside us, whispering to us, working for our restoration and wholeness, welcoming us as partners in the great conspiracy of love.

May we know this good news today. Amen.