

Pinched Piety

Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-15

Center Church, Hartford

September 20, 2020

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Tell the Jonah story

Every time someone gives me the line that the God of the Old Testament is an angry and vengeful God and everything that happens in those stories is violent, I want to send them to this little book of Jonah. I have often wondered if Jesus didn't have this story in the back of his mind when he said, "Love your enemies and pray for them." Jonah doesn't want a merciful God. Jonah wants that angry and vengeful God because Jonah does not like the people of Nineveh, who were enemies of his people, and so, Jonah assumes, enemies of God! Jonah didn't want to help God to save Nineveh and tried to get out of the job, because he knew that, as he says, "you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."

Like Jonah, I find it all too easy to want God to be angry with those with whom I am angry, to punish those I think need punishing. God is way more merciful than I am, and that mercy is not emotionally satisfying when I am angry. But who can read that last question of the Jonah story and not have their heart open up just a little bit, "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 what they need to know, and also many animals?" There's a wideness to God's mercy indeed. Mine can be a little too narrow. Maybe yours, too.

There's a second story I want to tell you. Tell story of landowner from Matthew 20:1-15. In the same way Jonah thought God's mercy to Nineveh was misplaced, the all-day workers in Jesus' parable think the landowner's generosity is misplaced. Those who work less don't deserve to get paid the same. Even if those who work more are not

getting ripped off because they agreed to what they saw as a fair wage. Suddenly it didn't look fair to them if someone who worked less was getting the same thing!

What they all got was “the usual daily wage.” An amount of money which was understood to be enough to support someone for a day. Enough to make sure they had food and shelter and clothing. Jesus is saying that it is God's desire that everyone has enough.

We live in a society in a world in which millions of people do not have enough, some of whom work very hard in dangerous conditions. In God's realm, says Jesus, this would not happen. Everyone would have what they need. What's “fair” in God's eyes is that everyone has what they need. No matter who they are. But many people, including too many Christians, just hate that idea. Again, there is a wideness to God's love that makes us all uncomfortable. Again, the last line of the story pulls at us, again a question like in Jonah: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

A former President of the United Church of Christ, the Rev. Dr. Avery Post, died a couple of weeks ago. I remember being at an event where Dr. Post spoke many years ago, and one of his lines has stuck with me ever since. He called on us not to have a “pinched piety.” Jonah and those all-day workers had a pinched piety. This week, let us all work on opening up the channels within us for mercy and generosity and see what happens. Because the world is full of people, and many animals, who desperately need us to do that. Amen.