



Liturgical Day: The Eighteenth Sunday of Easter

Date: September 18, 2005

Sermon Title: Is God Too Gracious?

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some of you who were Roman Catholics in the 80s and 90s might remember Joseph Cardinal Bernadine who served as Archbishop of Chicago until his death in 1996. Archbishop Bernadine was suffering from a serious illness, and heard those words that nobody wants to hear: he was told by his doctors that he had no more than a year to live. You or I might have taken that as an invitation to relax and enjoy what little time we have left in this world. But Bernadine was one of those whose call to ministry was so profound, that he took it as an invitation to make good use of every minute left. And so he didn't retire, as many expected he might, but threw himself into his work with an unmatched fervor.

I remember reading a newspaper article about Archbishop Bernadine during that last year. It seems that there was a death row inmate in the Chicago area who heard about Bernadine's health. He wanted to visit with a man who, like he, was facing death. So he wrote the Archbishop's office, and the Archbishop decided to meet with this man. I can't remember exactly what this person's crime was, but I do remember being disgusted when I read about it. What I found even more offensive, though, was the report of their visit. Bernadine said that after talking with one another, the death row inmate expressed a sense of remorse for what he had done. The Archbishop told him that if he was truly sorry for his sin, God would forgive him. And he went further to say that although the two of them would die in drastically different ways, in a year or two they would be in the same place.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to hear that. What if this man's crime had been committed against one of my boys? It is hard for me to imagine a dedicated servant of the church spending eternity with someone who had committed some brutal act of evil. I found myself thinking, "That's what's wrong with the church these days — we need to take sin more seriously. Not make it so easy to feel forgiven. Raise the bar a bit so people will try harder. Bernadine may want to forgive this guy, but I don't want to hear about it."

But if my response is: "That's what's wrong with the church these days," then the response of this morning's Bible lessons is probably: "That's what's wrong with Risendal."

In our first lesson, Jonah was called to travel to Nineveh and bring them God's word. Jonah, instead, boarded a ship headed in the opposite direction — to the far off city of Tarshish. He didn't do that because he was afraid of how the Ninevites would treat him. He didn't do that because he doubted that God could effectively work through him to reach a group of foreigners. He did it for exactly the opposite reason: he was afraid that God would succeed in working through him, and would bring that city to repentance and forgiveness. For Jonah, that's the last thing in the world that he wanted to have happen. Nineveh was the capitol city of Israel's great enemy, the Assyrian Empire. And Jonah certainly didn't want his enemy to receive God's forgiveness. So he rebelled every step of the way.

As you probably remember, with the help of an angry storm, frightened sailors, and a faithful fish, God brought Jonah to Nineveh after all. Now this city was so great, that it took a person three days to walk from end to end. So like a spoiled child, Jonah stomped a day's journey into the city, and then simply shouted out: *Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!* Not much of a sermon. Not much of a delivery. And certainly not a preacher with much heart in his message. But God was able to take that reluctant proclamation and make the miraculous happen. The whole city, from the King to the

FIRST LESSON
JONAH 3:10-4:11

PSALM
PSALM 145:1-8

SECOND LESSON
PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30

GOSPEL LESSON
ST. MATTHEW 20:1-16

PRAYER OF THE DAY
**LORD GOD, YOU CALL
US TO WORK IN YOUR
VINEYARD AND LEAVE
NO ONE STANDING
IDLE. SET US TO OUR
TASKS IN THE WORK
OF YOUR KINGDOM,
AND HELP US TO
ORDER OUR LIVES BY
YOUR WISDOM;
THROUGH YOUR SON,
JESUS CHRIST OUR
LORD. AMEN.**

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lowliest servant, repented of their evil ways. Even the animals fasted, and wore garments of mourning.ⁱ They turned to the God of Jonah and Israel. They received forgiveness for all their sins. And Jonah was furious.

It's hard to hear God calling, when that call doesn't match up with what we hoped to hear. It's hard to have our preconceived notions challenged by God's word, in a way that forces us to give up some cherished belief or way of doing things. But so often in the story of God's faithful people, that is what happens. People's lives are entirely changed by a God who breaks in and offers a different way of seeing things — a different direction for ministry to take. Think of the stories: Adam. Abraham. Moses. David. Jonah. Peter and the disciples. The Apostle Paul. God's touch in their lives brought changes that they never could have anticipated — changes that some of them opposed, at first, with all their might. But changes that drew them into the gracious and powerful work that God was doing in the world. Changes that allowed them to become part of this story of faith that we share.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we hear the parable of the Landowner and the Vineyard. From an economic point of view, it is another shocking parable — one that's got to make any small business owner uncomfortable. This landowner goes out into the marketplace at the break of day, at nine o'clock, at noon, at three, at five, and just before quitting time. Each time he goes out, he finds workers and sends them into the vineyard. Then, when quitting time comes, every worker is paid exactly the same: a full day's wages. Those who worked all day in the hot sun, and who were paid what they were promised, suddenly realized that they would have received just as much if they had only worked an hour or two. They were furious.

So are Jesus' disciples. They have given up so much to become his core group of followers. They left behind their families and their boats and their means of surviving, to follow him around the Galilean hillside. They were the first to get involved in what would eventually become the Christian Church. They hope to receive some special standing in his kingdom for their effort. But now they learn from Jesus that even those who come to faith at the last minute will be in just as good of shape as them in God's kingdom. That hardly seems fair to them. Three years of following Jesus from village to village, leaving homes and families behind... they thought that should earn them some sort of preferential treatment in God's kingdom.

I'm tempted to look down my nose at them for thinking in that way, but I'm afraid that I'm probably not all that different. I've worked most of my life to try and be faithful to God. It hasn't always been easy. And I haven't always succeeded. But I've been trying. And I've made some sacrifices along the way because of it. Now if I'm reading this parable correctly, and I'm pretty sure that I am, Jesus teaches me that someone could live a remarkably evil life, and at the very last moment turn to Christ, and receive the same reward as me. I don't want to hear that. It just isn't fair. But it is the way God works. God who is gracious, not fair. God who gives us what we need, not what we deserve. God who knows that you and I have one thing in common with the most horrible of criminals: that we are all in need of the gift of Christ's forgiveness. And God is more than willing to share it — with us and through us — and with anyone else who needs it and desires it.

That's why it seems especially appropriate that these lessons should be our focus on this, Saint Peter's first "Friendship Sunday." This is a day when we consider what it means to become part of God's effort to extend the reaches of grace farther than ever before. Those of you who have brought friends with you to worship this morning: just as God worked through Jonah and Jesus and Joseph Cardinal Bernadine, God is working through you to tell others that they are welcome here in midst of God's family. Those of you who have been invited to worship here this morning: just as God welcomed Ninevites and first century outsiders and a criminal in the late 1990s, God welcomes people like you and me into the wonder of grace and mercy.

We are here to celebrate the reality that God welcomes us all: sinners and saints; rich and poor; foolish and wise; women and men; adults and children. It is good to have this parable of Jesus as a reminder that God loves us and welcomes us just as fully as the most faithful saints who have ever lived. And we are here this morning to remember that God has called each of us to welcome others into this grace: those whom we love and cherish, as well as those we'd rather keep at a distance. It is good to have the story of Jonah to remind us that even our most flawed efforts at welcoming others can become a powerful tool in God's hands.

May God fill our hearts with grace, and make us to be gracious people. And through that, may others

come to an even fuller experience of our God. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor

First Lesson: ⁱⁱ

When God saw what they 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 appointed 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?" ⁱⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson (English):

"For 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." ^{iv}

Gospel Lesson (Greek):

Ὅμοια γάρ ἐστιν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ οἰκοδεσπότῃ, ὅστις ἐξῆλθεν ἅμα πρῶτῃ μισθώσασθαι ἐργάτας εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα αὐτοῦ. συμφωνήσας δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐργατῶν ἐκ δηναρίου τὴν ἡμέραν ἀπέστειλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα αὐτοῦ. καὶ ἐξελθὼν περὶ τρίτην ὥραν εἶδεν ἄλλους ἐστῶτας ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ ἀργούς· καὶ ἐκείνοις εἶπεν· ὑπάγετε καὶ ὑμεῖς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα, καὶ ὁ ἐὰν ἦ δίκαιον δώσω ὑμῖν. οἱ δὲ ἀπηλθον. πάλιν [δὲ] ἐξελθὼν περὶ ἕκτην καὶ ἐνάτην ὥραν ἐποίησεν ὡσαύτως. περὶ δὲ τὴν ἐνδεκάτην ἐξελθὼν εὗρεν ἄλλους ἐστῶτας καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· τί ὧδε ἐστήκατε ὅλην τὴν ἡμέραν ἀργοί; λέγουσιν αὐτῷ· ὅτι οὐδεὶς ἡμᾶς ἐμισθώσατο. λέγει αὐτοῖς· ὑπάγετε καὶ ὑμεῖς εἰς τὸν ἀμπελῶνα. ὁψίας δὲ γενομένης λέγει ὁ κύριος τοῦ ἀμπελῶνος τῷ ἐπιτρόπῳ αὐτοῦ· κάλεσον τοὺς ἐργάτας καὶ ἀπόδος αὐτοῖς τὸν μισθὸν ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῶν ἐσχάτων ἕως τῶν πρώτων. καὶ ἐλθόντες οἱ περὶ τὴν ἐνδεκάτην ὥραν ἔλαβον ἀνὰ δηνάριον. καὶ ἐλθόντες οἱ πρῶτοι ἐνόμισαν ὅτι πλεῖον λήμψονται· καὶ ἔλαβον [τὸ] ἀνὰ δηνάριον καὶ αὐτοί. λαβόντες δὲ ἐγόγγυζον κατὰ τοῦ οἰκοδεσπότου λέγοντες· οὗτοι οἱ ἔσχατοι μίαν ὥραν ἐποίησαν, καὶ ἴσους ἡμῖν αὐτοὺς ἐποίησας τοῖς βαστάσασσι τὸ βάρος τῆς ἡμέρας καὶ τὸν καύσωνα. ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς ἐνὶ αὐτῶν εἶπεν· ἑταίρε, οὐκ ἀδικῶ σε· οὐχὶ δηναρίου συνεφώνησας μοι; ἄρον τὸ σὸν καὶ ὑπάγε. θέλω δὲ τοῦτῳ τῷ ἐσχάτῳ δοῦναι ὡς καὶ σοί· [ἦ] οὐκ ἔξεστιν μοι ὁ θέλω ποιῆσαι ἐν τοῖς ἐμοῖς; ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου πονηρὸς ἐστίν· ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀγαθὸς εἰμι; οὕτως ἔσονται οἱ ἔσχατοι πρῶτοι καὶ οἱ πρῶτοι ἔσχατοι. ^v

i *When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish."* – Jonah 3:10-4:11, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ii A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.
iii Jonah 3:10-4:11, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

iv Ibid., St. Matthew 20:1-16,

v St. Matthew 20:1-16, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.