

God is sovereign; we are not

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Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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When God saw what the people of Nineveh 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?" Jonah 3:10-4:11

Jesus said, "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." Matthew 20:1-16

Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, began on Friday at sundown. The day before, in anticipation, National Public Radio ran a story about rabbis' messages to their congregations in 1918, as the world was reeling from the Spanish flu epidemic.¹ Rabbi Sigmund Hecht of Los Angeles, for instance, was quoted for having said, "...as I stand in this place in which I have not [stood] for the past nine weeks ... it is with deep gratitude to him on high that I ... resume the duties of my office."

At the time I heard those words, it had only been a few days since I had been blessed to stand here and at the altar and share Word and Sacrament with some of you, in person for the first time in six months. So much has been so different for so many of us now since the sudden start of pandemic restrictions. And the radio story was a reminder of other pandemics, other times of grave uncertainty, and even politicized and divisive opinions about whose interests should prevail in the time of trial. Hear the words of Rabbi Moise Bergman of Albuquerque, addressing his

people in 1918: *“It is hard to answer the man who says his business has been hurt by the quarantine, but it will be impossible to answer the one who says, my child has died because of the neglect of the state.”*

We humans mainly wish to lead secure lives on a level playing field where opportunities, consequences and rewards are predictable and fairly distributed. But no. Sudden changes often mean sudden troubles. Yesterday’s predictions become the scathing op ed of tomorrow. When the ‘good old days’ come to an end we see in them systems that favored the few and belittled the many: whether due to race or gender or birth order or who got here first or whatever made or makes *them* other than and less than *us*. Here in this life we are ... *placed among things that are passing away*² ... and so often we are like the Ninevites of old, *not knowing the right hand from the left*.

And speaking of Ninevites, you may have noticed in today’s first lesson what was churning in the mind and gut of the prophet Jonah. He had been sent by God to ‘*Nineveh, that great city ...*’ and told to ‘*cry out against it ... for their wickedness.*’ After a false start, Jonah did go. And guess what? They repented! And instead of gratitude that they had heard and heeded him, Jonah is angry. God actually loves and forgives those low-life, self-indulgent, previously godless Ninevites. And he’d been hoping to see them cruelly punished by the Almighty!

Expectations and outcomes and our ideas of fairness are also intrinsic to today’s gospel passage, where Jesus invites us to consider and identify with various laborers. Some of the laborers worked only an hour but were paid as if they’d worked all day. Imagine their delight and amazement to be treated with such unexpected generosity. They may remind us of the unexpected and unmerited generosity once shown to us. We got a break or a second chance that we didn’t deserve according to the usual rules. A friend or mentor believed in and cared for us when no one else did and even when we repeatedly failed. Someone who was recently telling me about one such relationship paused and said, *“That was when I really understood the meaning of grace.”*

Some of us may more easily see ourselves over at the other end of the line, with those vineyard laborers who got up at dawn and worked a whole day. They saw what the one-hour laborers were paid and they had started doing the math, expecting a huge windfall. But no. They also got the fair, one-day’s pay. It was what they’d agreed to, but they are angry. They feel used.

Jesus begins this teaching by telling us it’s about the kingdom of heaven, and he ends it by reminding us of what, in theological language, we call the sovereignty of God: *“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”*

At least one other facet of today’s gospel also merits our attention, though you can’t see it in the text per se. This teaching is unique to the Gospel of Matthew, and the author, likely a Jewish believer, may have thought this teaching would be apt in an emerging Christian community where the first Jewish followers of Jesus were either welcoming or resisting welcoming Gentile converts – those ‘outsiders’ – into their fellowship.

Some of us have a story or two about a church newcomer who takes a seat and settles in only to be stared down by the longtime member: *“Welcome! That’s my pew.”* It’s a tiny incident but emblematic of how we who imagine ourselves to have been laboring since dawn ostracize or haze or belittle those who are just showing up to our all-nicely-packaged version of God.

Some of what we may be called to contemplate and respond to today, some of what miffed and puzzled Jonah, some of what Jesus was aiming at in us, may have also been in the mind and heart of Rabbi Ferdinand Hirsch of Athens, Georgia, as he addressed his people during the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. *“The hand of God has lain heavily upon the world in these past weeks.”* he said. *“There is so much to learn these days in the uncertainty of life. Let me plead with you - nay, demand of you - that you make peace with one another. There is so much newness, so much smallness in our makeups. Whatever we do, let’s ... bury past quarrels. Life is so short and uncertain.”* Amen.

¹ *All things considered*, September 17, 2020, Sacha Pfeiffer, host

² The Collect for Proper 20, the Sunday closest to September 21.

