

“Angry about Mercy and a Bush, and Anxious about Wages”

The longer we live on the planet, the longer we realize that what we call “I” is actually a conglomeration of opinions gained from others, reactions to situations, expressions of likes and dislikes, intentions we may or may not live out, and fears that express themselves as anger or anxiety.

Jonah, in today’s Hebrew scriptures, is a particularly good icon for this many-faceted way of functioning in the world. Although he is supposedly a prophet, and thus obliged to share God’s intentions with God’s people, God had a hard time pleasing Jonah, who was supposedly his voice in the world. When God had Jonah spend some time inside a giant fish to convince him that it was necessary to deliver God’s message about the wickedness of the people of Nineveh, Jonah decided that to do what God asked was preferable to being digested by a sea monster.

He delivered the message, but when God mercifully decided not to punish the city because the people of Nineveh heeded his warnings, Jonah was unhappy with God and sought shelter under a bush that God placed to give him shade. The next day, a worm ate the bush, and Jonah was so miserable he wanted to die, and told God that it was right for him, Jonah, to be angry with God’s actions.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a vineyard, and those who work in it to laborers the vineyard owner—that is, God—to take care of the vines. When those who begin work early in the day learn that those who have come later have received the same wages, they reproach the owner, even though they have received fair pay for the day’s work.

When we go to work for God, we need to be able to accept the work on God’s terms. Once we have accepted the job, Paul says, “Living is Christ”...that is, we need to be able to realize that God may know something that we don’t know about another’s situation. God is God, and we are not.

Every life contains some of the “scorching sun” that Jonah experiences when God removes the shade of the bush, or when the workers work through the heat of the day. In chapter 55 of the prophecies of Isaiah, the prophet speaks for God, saying, “Let the wicked forsake their ways, and the evil ones their thoughts, and let them turn to the Lord, and he will have compassion, and to their God, and he will richly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord.”

What Jonah and the vineyard workers all lack is trust that God knows what God is doing. In God’s world, compassion manifests in ways that ordinary rationality may not recognize or accept. It may not seem fair to me, but I am not the judge. In both the passage from Jonah, and the passage from the Gospel of Matthew, God is moved to compassion or generosity. Jonah is angry because he feels God has made him look foolish in front of the people of Nineveh. The workers are anxious because they think they have been treated unfairly, even though the vineyard owner has honored his agreement with them.

If we accept to work in the vineyard, we don't get to tell the owner how we will be paid. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." When we seek to grow in Jesus Christ, we accept a subsidiary position. We acknowledge that someone else is boss. The water, the nourishment, and the harvest are determined by that someone else—that is, God. If God decides that the last will be first, and the first will be last, that is God's business.

We have choice from God. We have the choice to stop working for him. However, as Peter says to Jesus in John 6, "To whom shall we go? You have the words of Life." So, once we accept that we are on the road with Jesus, and that our lives are his, how do we live? Psalm 148 is the model: "Every day I will bless you, and praise your name for ever and ever." We tell of God's marvelous acts, and we acknowledge something that the angry prophet and the anxious workers could not: "The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness."

Paul tells the disciples, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...[then] I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents." One thing is sure once we get on the road with Jesus: there will be rewards, and there will be challenges. Our job is to remember, and live out the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, the Great Commandment to love God and to love our neighbors, and the Great Commission to take that love into all the world. To live this out prayerfully, a regular reading of today's collect will be uplifting and encouraging.

We have been given bodies, minds and souls with which to live for God. We can work to make sure that those three aspects of our existence speak with one voice, the voice of love, and not with the varying voices, opinions and complaints that we may call "I." The Anglican priest, poet and spiritual director George Herbert said in his poem "The Wreath," (in which he referred to his poetry as a wreath of praise for God) "Give me simplicity, that I may live,...that I may know thy ways, know them, and practice them, then shall I give, for this poor wreath, give thee a *Crown* of praise."

Finally, it is God's business, and we must trust that his aim is not always what would appear to be rational to us. After Jonah tells God that he is angry enough to die, God says to Jonah, "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 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and many animals?" To choose to serve God is to know our priorities, to know our right hand from our left, and to carry out what God asks, without having a hissy fit under a bush somewhere. Living for God and God's purposes does not make life easy, but it does make it simple. We always seek fruitful labor for those purposes. Whenever we are faced with a challenge, a change, or a choice, we can ask one prayerful question: "Where is God in this?" And then, we listen patiently for the still, small voice.

AMEN.