

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend Canon Sister Rosina Ampah, OSH
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 21, 2008
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

The Graciousness of God to Humanity and Humanity's Response to that Graciousness

We have two wonderful stories to work with this morning, not even considering Paul's great letter to the Philippians. The two stories beautiful stories are Jonah and Jesus' story about the workers in the vineyard. Before I go any further, I want to title my sermon as "God's Graciousness to Humanity and Humanity's Response to that Graciousness". First, let us review the story of Jonah up to where we picked up in today's lesson where Jonah was saying he was angry even to die. The story begins with God asking Jonah to go to the land of Nineveh to preach because the people of Nineveh were living wickedly and Jonah refused to go. Not only did Jonah refuse to go but he decided to run away to Tarshish and it was during that escape that God caused the sea to be very rough and produced a great storm. The ship Jonah was on encountered great difficulty and was threatening to sink. The people on board were called to pray to their gods for deliverance. During that time Jonah was found hiding and not praying and when he was confronted he confessed that he was the problem because he was running away from his God. So the people asked Jonah what they could do to save the ship and its passengers. Jonah asked them to throw him overboard and as soon as they did the sea became calm. In the meantime, God

appointed a whale to swallow Jonah and dropped him on the beach of Nineveh after three days in the belly of the whale.

When Jonah found himself on the shore of Nineveh he decided to preach and one can imagine how Jonah preached: Fire and brimstone!! The people of Nineveh heard what Jonah had to say and learned what God intended to do to them and so they repented. Instead of Jonah waiting in the shade in the city he decided to go and sit outside of the city in the sun under a little booth he had made for himself. Now, God had to teach Jonah a lesson with his anger and self-righteousness, God caused a tree to grow over Jonah's head to protect him from the sun and in the night appointed a worm to eat the root of the tree so the tree died in the morning. That is where we picked up the story today of God asking Jonah if he was right to be angry and Jonah saying he was angry to die. While Jonah was fuming the king of Nineveh has called for a fast and repentance asking every Tom, Dick, and Harry to sit in ashes and humble themselves before God in case God will have pity on them and forgive them and God did. God's Graciousness to Humanity and Humanity's response.

God's forgiveness angered Jonah the more and God wanted Jonah to acknowledge his anger and how he was acting toward others. While Jonah was upset about a dying tree, he could not bring himself to forgive another human being.

Now my questions are: Why wouldn't Jonah go to Nineveh to preach? Why did he refuse and run away and his answer seemed to indicate that he did not like the people of Nineveh. Is it because it was a Gentile City and he wanted it destroyed? This character was racist and why should he waste his time on the people he did not like? However, God who created us all does not choose one group of human beings above the other if it comes to graciousness. God sees us all as children and forgives us when we do the wrong thing just as the people of Nineveh did, but changed at Johan's preaching.

This story is a powerful lesson to us today because of the way we treat one another and how we live our lives as though we do not need one another. The Jonah story is a universal story and Jonah a universal character. How many times have we pointed a finger at somebody forgetting that three fingers are pointing at us? I believe that was Jonah's problem, when he was being so self-righteous and saying with his attitude that he did not care if the people of Nineveh died since they were Gentiles, forgetting that they were all children of God. Jonah was concerned about a tree rather than 250,000 people that God had forgiven. Jonah could not even appreciate how good a preacher he was to have changed 250,000 people from their sins with his sermon.

This brings me to Jesus' story about the workers in the vineyard. Are they any different from the Jonah character? No, they were very upset too with God's generosity and God had to ask them a question if they

resented the kindness he did with his own money? We live in a world and societies that see fairness as a given and could not understand why anybody could be gracious to another being. So our first reaction when we hear a story like this is to judge that the landowner was unfair, but that is how God works. Who would have thought Paul would become one of the great saints in the Church? Paul maybe one of the workers called in at the last moment while others have bourn the heat of the day but you and I know how hard he worked and who are we to say he should be paid less if God decides to pay him the same amount as the earlier ones?

The truth is, God sees us all as children who need help and will help us the best way God sees fit and it may be good for us as humans to start seeing ourselves in that way too. How great it would be to see ourselves as different threads that could be woven into beautiful clothes; black, white, yellow etc. can work together as united human beings and stop this dividing and hatred business. Another image would be to sometimes see ourselves as fingers and together a hand to help God's creation. We are like flowers in a garden, God's garden and each can represent a variety of flowers which makes the garden beautiful, tall people, short people, thin people, fat people are all varieties of flowers in God's beautiful garden. Unfortunately, our society we live in is more interested in dividing us than uniting us and seems to enjoy vengeance than forgiveness and so call vengeful people strong, and forgiven people we term weak which is very sad.

This brings me to Paul's epistle to the Church in Philippi in which Paul is asking them to live a life worthy of the Good News of the Gospel message. What is the Good News of the Gospel? As far as I know the

Good News of the Gospel is Love, Forgiveness and Reconciliation. So why are we still living as though we have not heard the Good News? Paul, a former persecutor turned and lived a different life and worked harder than even those before him so we can follow his example and change because it is not too late! Sometimes we claim to have been in the Church all our lives, what have we done to leave our marks when we are gone? Don't forget that you are part of a thread that needs to be woven into God's beautiful cloth - The Kingdom of God. So my brothers and sisters, the lessons today are for us, they were written so we can have something to guide us in the right path toward the Kingdom/vineyard. Are you living the good news of the Gospel and if not, why not? Do not worry about where you have been but worry about where you are going from today. I am pleading with you today as Paul did with the Church in Phillipi to live according to the Good News of the Gospel which is Love, Forgiveness and Reconciliation. Reconcile with one another, stay faithful in community and forgive one another and above all Love one another as Christ has loved us. And the God who called us all into the community called the Church will empower, give you the ability and wisdom to accomplish them!! May God bless you all! Amen