

Pentecost 16

September 20, 2020

Jonah 3:10—4:11

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly,^[a] and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

⁵Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. ⁶Now the LORD God appointed a plant^[b] and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort.^[c] So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. ⁷But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." ¹⁰And the LORD said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Psalms 145:1-8

¹ I will exalt you, O | God my King,*

and bless your name forev- | er and ever.

² Every day | will I bless you*

and praise your name forev- | er and ever.

³ Great is the LORD and greatly | to be praised;*

there is no end | to his greatness.

⁴ One generation shall praise your works | to another*

and shall de- | clare your power.

⁵ I will ponder the glorious splendor | of your majesty*

and all your | marvelous works.

⁶ They shall speak of the might of your | wondrous acts,*

and I will tell | of your greatness.

⁷ They shall publish the remembrance of | your great goodness;*

they shall sing of your | righteous deeds.

⁸ The LORD is gracious and full | of compassion,*

slow to anger and | of great kindness.

Philippians 1:21-30

²¹For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

²⁷Only let your manner of life be worthy^[h] of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Matthew 20:1-16

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ²After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius^[a] a day, he sent them into his vineyard. ³And going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, ⁴and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too, and whatever is right I will give you.' ⁵So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour, he did the same. ⁶And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing. And he said to them, 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' ⁷They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' ⁸And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first.' ⁹And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. ¹⁰Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. ¹¹And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house, ¹²saying, '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.' ¹³But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. ¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?'^[b] ¹⁶So the last will be first, and the first last."

Message: Praying With Our Fingers Crossed

At some point in every one of the eight worship services in our Lutheran Book of Worship – three settings of Holy Communion, Matins, Vespers, Compline, and the two Responsive Prayer or Suffrages services – we collectively pray the Lord's Prayer. And in the course of that prayer we will declare to our Heavenly Father, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." At that moment, we all really want to go on record as being truthful – that we really do want that for which we pray.

But I wonder how often we subconsciously cross our fingers behind our backs while we pray that particular petition – thy will be done.

But do we really want that? Or maybe it's a case where we secretly assume that because we're such good church folk that of course God's will and ours coincide! Of course God would want what we want because we're basically good people. And so we hear the parable of Jesus about all the workers being paid equally regardless of how long they worked and piously nod our heads in agreement. We may even go so far as to criticize those workers who grumbled; shame on them! We'd have been happy for them if it had been us!

Or would we? How many here recall the name Jeffrey Dahmer? Dahmer, a mass murderer, had abused and then killed 17 young men, cannibalizing them and storing body parts in his refrigerator.

In November of 1994, Dahmer himself was murdered, beaten to death with a broom handle wielded by a fellow prisoner. I must confess I don't have much of a problem with that. I find myself in agreement with the suffering of the victims families, regretting only that it ended his life too soon...that he should have suffered more.

No, I don't have a problem with his murder. What I have a problem with and struggle with is his conversion. You see, a few months before, Jeffrey Dahmer claims to have had a religious experience. He was baptized in the prison whirl pool, and spent much of his time reading religious material.

So now, it seems, Jeffrey Dahmer is experiencing all the glorious benefits of God's kingdom in the beauty of the presence of Jesus himself!

And everything inside me wants to scream, "That's not fair! Oh, sure, maybe I've sinned a little, but I've tried hard to be a good Christian!

- I've gone to church every week
- I've given 10% of my earnings

- I've taught Sunday school for 20 years
- I've gone to Seminary
- I've served on council
- I've played organ for 10 years
- I've **believed** better, more deeply, more sincerely than he!

Bottom line? Secretly, we believe we've **believed** better than he, than "those people"! "He couldn't have really been repentant! They don't really believe...not like we have! He probably just said he believed in hopes that it might do him some good! They certainly don't deserve the same reward we deserve! How could God do that? He has made him equal to us...to us! We, who have borne the burden of our day and the scorching heat!"

And there we have it, don't we? Deep down we secretly believe and function as though we have received life and health and salvation because we earned it! Deep down, we believe that we stand to receive what we think we actually, really deserve! Or that at least we deserved more than somebody else! "After all," we grumble, "we don't just believe to get out of punishment, like Dahmer! We really believe!"

But maybe it's even worse that we thought! *Why* do you and I want to be believers in Jesus Christ? Why would we want him to be our Lord and Master even if we honestly recognize that we don't deserve it? I would suggest that if even a part of our answer to that question includes the phrase "to go to heaven instead of hell", then there is no difference between us and our hypothetical Dahmers at all! If we're in this for what we're going to get out of it, for the benefits we'll receive, then we've made it all about us, haven't we? That level of self-centeredness is synonymous with sin!

Do we worship Christ Jesus as Lord and Master simply because he deserves it, or for what we hope to gain by it? Do we love, serve and obey him because he alone is worthy of our devotion, or for what we presume we'll get out of it? Do we want God's will to be done because of how we hope to be positively affected by it, or regardless of how it might benefit us?

It's at moments like these when we come face to face with the hard gospel truth that repentance becomes real and we truly confess: we have not loved you with our whole heart or our neighbors as ourselves!

And the good news is that our merciful God in Christ Jesus knows our hearts and loves us anyway! For if we confess our sins, God is merciful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness!

Thanks be to God!

Prayers of the Church, Pentecost 16, September 20, 2020

Let us approach the throne of grace on behalf of the Church, the world, and one another.

A brief silence is kept.

Thank you, Father, for calling us early, midday, and late in life, to be your disciples and workers in your Kingdom's vineyard! Thank you for seeking us to do your work, even when nobody else thinks we're good enough to amount to anything. Give us grace to hear your call, and strength to do your will. Thank you for the wages of everlasting life and salvation, and for your pleasure in us.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Make the Church that place where all may see the fair beauty of Jesus; find shelter in his widespread arms; grow in faith and joy; and labor fruitfully to his glory and for the benefit of others.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our persecuted sisters and brothers around the world, especially in North Korea, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Nigeria. Give them courage to honor Christ in their body; to speak and live the Gospel with boldness and joy; and to know that they are participating in the suffering of Jesus.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Help the people of this congregation to stand firm together, of one spirit, striving to proclaim the Gospel by words and deeds. Make us willing to work at whatever task pleases you and draws others closer to you. Make us glad when latecomers join us in our labors, knowing that your grace has drawn them to serve you, even as it drew us.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our young people, especially those considering a vocation to ministry and service in your Church. Give them delight in learning, and love for your people. Preserve them from the consequences of folly or malice. Use their energy to please you and to serve their neighbor.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Grant wisdom to our earthly leaders. Let them seek you while you may be found; call upon you while you are near; and govern in accordance with your holy will. Graciously grant patience, kindness, and humility to everyone, so that we may lead peaceable lives.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Be the light and salvation to those who stand in harm's way to safeguard life and freedom. Amid warfare and violence, let them put their trust in you and not be afraid. Cause them to bear the fruits of justice and righteousness; and give them the fair wages of honor, health, and peace when their work is done.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Be the safe shelter and solid rock to everyone in times of trouble. We lift before you the victims of the west coast wild fires, the Midwest derecho, and the east coast hurricane, especially our sister congregation, St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Pensacola. Lift them high above the things that assail them; and be the strength of their life. Give patience and compassion to all who work to restore and rebuild, especially those whose work is long, hard, and thankless.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Be close by those members of our church family and our community who's presence we miss or for whose health we have concerns. We lift especially before you this morning Dallas and Mary Rathe, Marilyn Fredrick, Norma Schlee, Xavior Roach, Kelly Staley, Pastor David Steffenson, Pastor James Puotyual, Pastor Mel Harris, and the VansCoy family.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We thank you, Father, for those we love who have departed this life and are now with Christ. Though we grieve, we also rejoice; for we know that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Give us strength to labor cheerfully in the vineyards of goodness, kindness, forgiveness, and righteousness. Make us as generous to others with those things as Jesus is to us. Make us rejoice to see how many he has redeemed and welcomed into your blessed Kingdom; and when we see him face to face.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**