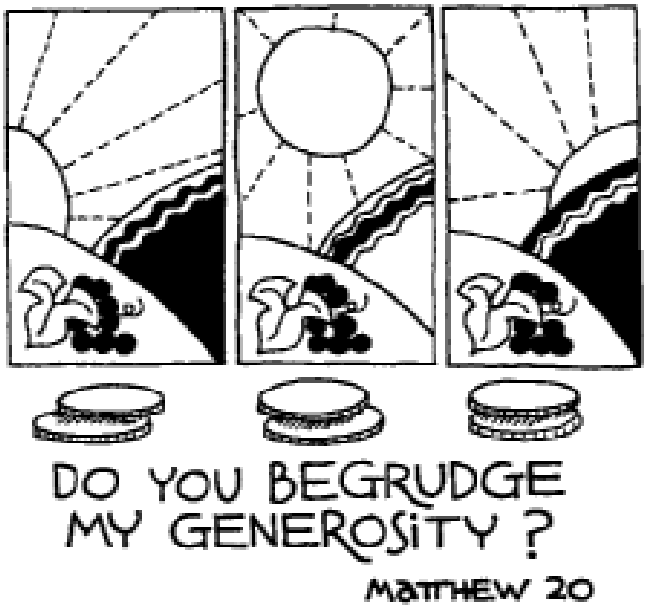
Season after Pentecost
(Proper 20A)



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RCL

SEASON AFTER PENTECOST

(Proper 20A)

Psalm 145 All for MP

First Lesson: A reading from the Book of Jonah (3:10-4:11)

When God saw what the people of Ninevah 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?"

The word of the lord ***Thanks be to God.***

A Reading from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Philippians (1:21-30)

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, 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. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

The Word of the Lord.

Second Lesson: *(People seated)* A reading from the Gospel according to St.Matthew (20:1-16)

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."

Hear what the spirit is saying to the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

SERMON FOR PROPER 20A [2026]

Gracious God, your Word surprises, challenges, upsets, and overturns our way of seeing and thinking. Come and find us now, wherever we are, however we are, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, cause that which is withering in us to blossom, and that which is limiting in us to broaden, until we see as you see, and thereby perceive the kingdom you call us to build. +

Jonah has been called and sent by God to the city of Ninevah, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. That Empire, in 722BC, swept across the Holy Land, obliterating the Northern Kingdom of Israel and placing the Southern Kingdom of Judah under harsh subjugation. Jonah's message to Ninevah: repent or suffer the judgement of the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel.

Jonah doesn't want to go to Ninevah, so he promptly gets on a ship sailing the other way. But the storms on the Mediterranean convince the sailors that ***somebody*** has angered the gods, and they arrive at the conclusion that that somebody was Jonah, who, after confessing that he was running from his God and his mission, is immediately thrown overboard.

That's when he was swallowed by the fish. For three days and three nights he lived in the belly of the fish, which arrived at the shores of Ninevah and spit him out.

Jonah now begins to fulfill the task given him by God in the first place. Like most ancient conquering empires in antiquity, the Assyrians were cruel and ruthless, leaving behind them a trail of death and destruction, uprooting and displacement, fear and sorrow, anger and resentment, all intensified by the crushing despair of powerlessness. Some things don't change.

Jonah went ahead and pronounced God's judgement from the heart of the city: for your cruelty and wickedness, Ninevah will be overthrown in forty days! Then he sat back to watch. Like all partisans in every age, he was convinced that God shared in his contempt for Ninevah, and he was looking forward to seeing the Assyrians get what they had coming to them.

But contrary to Jonah's expectations and secret hope, Ninevah took his words to heart. The entire city, from King and Court right down to the livestock, repented with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. God was pleased with Ninevah's conversion and withdrew the judgement upon its people that Jonah had proclaimed.

Now, you'd think that a prophet who had successfully called the capital city of a vast empire to repentance would be pleased with his results. Not Jonah. He was sorely disappointed when he found out he wasn't going to get a chance to see God zap Ninevah. "I knew it! I just knew it! I knew that you were a compassionate God, long-suffering and abounding in mercy. Something told me you wouldn't follow through with your intention to punish your enemies (our enemies)—that's why I got on a ship headed the other way!" And Jonah went off and sulked, probably hoping that God would fulfill his expectations and embrace Jonah's contempt for Ninevah, after all.

As Jonah sat there feeling sorry for himself, the Lord arranged for a plant to grow next to him, providing him with shade from the scorching sun. And Jonah was very happy with his plant. But the next morning God arranged for a worm to attack the plant, so that it withered and died. Suffering from the blistering sun and a scorching wind, Jonah begins to curse his very existence.

"Are you angry about the plant?" God asks.
"Yes! Mortally angry!" Jonah explodes.
God responds: "You're sorry about the plant, though you did not have the trouble of growing it, a plant that came up one night and died the next. Should I not be sorry about the great city of Ninevah, with its hundred and twenty thousand people who can't tell right from wrong, as well as cattle without number?"

It's almost as if, for Jonah, the loving kindness, long suffering and abounding mercy of God are ***not*** a good thing. At least when God applies those qualities to people we don't like, and we're trying to enlist God's investment in our contempt for others. Love your enemies, Jesus said. Pray for those who mistreat you. Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. God loves everybody, even when we don't.

As today's Gospel opens the lectionary has skipped over an entire chapter of Matthew's Gospel. The rich young man has come to Jesus, asking about the path to eternal life, and been told to liquidate his estate, give the proceeds to the poor and come, follow Jesus. The rich young man walked away sadly, prompting Jesus to make his famous declaration that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Peter then reminds Jesus that the disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. Jesus promises them restoration and a place of authority in the kingdom. Eternal life. The last words we encounter before turning to today's lesson are the same ones with which today's Gospel ends: The first will be last and the last will be first.

Of all the parables and other sayings of Jesus, the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard is perhaps the most telling demonstration of how the world's values and assumptions, and even the world's concepts of justice and fairness, are turned on their heads in the light of the ways of God, which are, as Isaiah (55:8) reminds us, "higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts"

The owner goes to the public square and hires a group of workers, offering the usual day's wage, a denarius, just enough to sustain a family's life for a day. He goes back four more times as the day wears on, hiring the last group just an hour before quitting time. When at the end of the work day he settles accounts with the workers, he begins with the last hired, paying the one-hour workers the amount he had agreed on with the twelve-hour workers. Now, if you were one of those twelve hour workers, when you saw the one-hour workers getting the usual day's wage that you were promised at the beginning of the day, you might assume that the owner must have decided to increase everyone's wages and that you would get considerably more than the one-hour workers. But everybody gets the same. A denarius. Just enough to sustain life for another day.

And when the all-day crew starts griping, that's just what they're told. You got what you bargained for—a day's wages. Enough to sustain life for another day. What I choose to give the others is none of your concern. ***Everybody*** gets to live for another day.

The availability of day laborers for vineyard owners to hire at subsistence wages was largely the result of social upheaval. Many of these people had been driven from their land by the forces of empire—greed in high places, exorbitant taxation and corrupt collection practices. Many of the laborers were former owners, forced to work on lands that had been snatched from them by oppressive political, economic and social forces. At one level, the ability of the vineyard owner to get away with such vast wage inequity appears to be just one more component of an oppressive system that holds people in subjugation.

Your ways are not my ways, says the Lord, nor is your way of thinking my way of thinking. Even as we rightly cling to the world's concepts of justice and fairness in our dealings one with another, concepts like equal pay for equal work based on an hourly wage or on work accomplished, as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are also called to apply God's higher thoughts and ways to our life together.
Measuring greatness from the bottom up.
Placing a higher value on quality of life at ***every*** level of human society than on the so-called "rights" of corporations and the very wealthy to amass more and more, concentrating wealth in the hands of the very few, while at the same time raising the bar for everyone's standard of living and placing it beyond the reach of many.

As followers of Him who was taken as a refugee to Egypt, fleeing from a murderous tyrant, and many of us descendants of the huddled masses who came here yearning to breathe free, it is incumbent upon us, even as we exercise due diligence for public safety, to welcome the alien and care for the stranger.

The earth is the Lord's, declares the Psalmist (24:1), and the fulness thereof. We are responsible to its Creator, and ours, for its respectful and responsible use, to God's honor and glory, acknowledging our status as part of it. Or for a non-theist interpretation, we haven't inherited it from our parents; we are borrowing it from our grandchildren.

As we endeavor to reflect the image of God in our daily lives, seeking God's help in correcting our distortions of it, and striving to recognize the image of God and the face of the Christ in others, may our vision be comprehensive, embracing all races and cultures. And in all things, may we follow the example of him who came not to be served but to serve, and to offer up all he had and all he was to reconcile us to God.

For everyone who was first will be last, and everyone who was last will be first.

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