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Jonah 3:10-4:11, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning comes from our Epistle Reading, from the First Chapter of Philippians. I am drawn to that wistful verse 23 – the verse where St. Paul longs for heaven, as many a Christian has done in the centuries since Paul. The apostle says this:

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.(Phil 1:23, RSV)

So, I begin with that verse yearning for heaven. But my theme is well-phrased in the terms of another of St. Paul's convictions, this one from Galatians 6:9:

<sup>9</sup>And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.(Galatians 6:9, KJV)

So, this is my theme: Sometimes we become weary in this life and would be glad to move on to heaven, yet, it is still day, there is still good work for us to do, and let us not grow weary in well-doing.

Let me begin my discussion of weariness with life by speaking of that rascal Jonah, from our First Lesson. The man's conduct is almost burlesque. I can't think of a more reluctant prophet and a poorer witness to God's grace than dear old Jonah. Among the various complaints we could bring against the man, there is this one concerning weariness of life: the man is far too casual in speaking of his own death.

Twice he does it in the course of our short reading. First, the city repents and the people turn to the LORD, with the good outcome that the LORD spares the city from destruction. But this divine mercy displeases Jonah very much and makes him angry. His complaint is so extraordinary it would be funny, except that it is so mean:

<sup>2</sup>And he prayed to the LORD and said, "I pray thee, 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 thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. <sup>3</sup>Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live."

And so it is that the Lord's forgiving love is insufferable for Jonah. He can't stand it! It is as if Jonah supposes that he himself does not stand in need of such love.

And then, when his shade tree dies, again Jonah says, well, "I might as well die":

<sup>8</sup>When the sun rose, God appointed a sultry east wind, and the sun beat upon 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."

My worry about Jonah is this: Does he really mean to hasten off to meet his Maker in such a contrary state of mind? Is he ready to meet the Lord? There is a day of reckoning for each of us:

<sup>10</sup>...for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. <sup>11</sup>For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. <sup>12</sup>So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.(Romans 14:10-12, KJV)

And again,

<sup>7</sup>Be not deceived ; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. <sup>8</sup>For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.(Gal 6:7-8, KJV)

So, Jonah is wrong, in my opinion, to desire death ahead of time, before the Lord is ready to lay him to rest.

Now, let's consider St. Paul. The tone of his desire for heaven is different from that of Jonah. Jonah desires death because he is so angry with God. But Paul desires to depart and to be with Christ, not because from anger with God, but from love for God.

There is a gentleness, then, to the apostle's talk of heaven. He would be glad to be off to be with Christ, yet he humbles himself before the Lord's timing.

There is a scene in a great Tommy Lee Jones movie somewhat like this. The movie is called *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005). The movie is set on the Texas/Mexico border and Tommy Lee Jones is taking the body of his friend Melquiades home to Mexico for burial. Along the way, he encounters an old, blind man, played by Levon Helm (who was drummer for the rock group *The Band* back in the 1960s.) The old man lives alone and has almost no food, but what he has he shares with Tommy Lee Jones and his companion. He takes their hands and prays a simple table grace. Then when Tommy and his companion are packing up and getting ready to go, the old man says to Tommy, "I have a favor to ask you. Would you shoot me?" He goes on to explain that the only one who visits him is his son, but his son has not visited for many months. The son has cancer and the old man knows that his son will not be coming to visit him any more. The old man is a pious Christian and he does not want to offend God by killing himself, so he asks Tommy Lee Jones to shoot him, so that he will die by someone else's hand and not his own. Tommy declines, saying he doesn't want to offend God either. So they move on, leaving the old man alone. But later in the movie, we see another scene with that old man, and he is still being generous, still be good. As long as he could, he meant to go on doing good in this world, though he was a very poor man.

Likewise with St. Paul. He longs to be off and to be with Christ. But he does not mean to go ahead of time. He does not mean to offend God. And meanwhile, there is good work for him to do. He means to not become weary in well-doing. He means to go onwards, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. He means to peddle on as long as breath remains in his lungs.

And this brings us to this morning's last reading, our Gospel story about the workers in the vineyard. Yesterday, when I took the Blessed Sacrament to our member Marion Dietmann and read this Gospel story for her, she said that the story reminded her of the

Great Depression and of how work was so very scarce back then. Her father, she said, was a cabinet maker, but there was not enough work for him in his town. That is what brought them to New York City.

And so, Marion felt sympathy for the workers in the village, and rightfully so. As it turned out, the workers who had worked from dawn to the sunset complained that they should be paid more than those who had worked only the one hour. And yet, think of those workers who had worked only the one hour. They were paid a denarius, which what they needed to make it through the day and to put bread on the table for their families. It was not a fortune, nor insufficient, but more along the lines of the petition in our Lord's Prayer that says, "Give us this day our daily bread." As Luther says, "daily bread" does not mean simply the breadbasket, but all that we need to survive that day. And then, tomorrow, we ask for another's portion of our daily bread. The worker need the denarius, not half-a-denarius.

Yet, those late-called workers had sat in the village waiting for work. And each hour they waited, their chance of employment was slipping away. There was no welfare system back then. They needed the work. They needed a denarius, and the great news of the Gospel is that God gives us what we need, without regard for whether we merit it.

And so it that there is a double word of encouragement for the eleventh-hour saint. Some of you might have come to faith fairly late in life. You might just now be finding your way. In terms of years serving the Lord, I guess you will never catch up to the white saints in our congregation who have served the Lord from their mother's knee. And yet, the Lord loves you just as much. You too are precious in the eyes of the Lord. And I hope you will be pleased to know that the white-haired saints of the church do not begrudge you the strong love of the Lord, for they know that in the end, they depend on that too, and not on their own merits.

And the other word of encouragement shifts the angle a bit on the eleventh hour saint. Some saints of the church have been working those eleven hour. They have indeed been working in the heat of the day. Or maybe they have been working for fewer than eleven hours, but they share with those long workers a kind of weariness with work. They are played out. They have suffered blows.

I think, for example, of the bankers in our city who have lost their jobs, who have gathered up their possessions and left behind their place of work, maybe even their homes in this town. How could blame them for being weary and discouraged. But it is the nature of our God to come to us even late in the day, when there does not seem much future ahead of us, and to say to us, "You too come. You too come and labor in the vineyard. For, after all, though you might be tired and discouraged, your neighbors still need your help. This world still needs you to get up and at 'em, and I will be with you."

In this same letter to the Philippians in which St. Paul admits that he would rather be off to be with Christ, he nonetheless also gives a precious testimony of his intention to go on working for Christ while he can:

...this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, <sup>14</sup>I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.(Philippians 3:13-14, KJV)

Let us do the same. Let us not become weary in well-doing, but press on toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.