

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Jonah 3:10-4:11, Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16
The Strangest Thing: Begrudging Our Lord's Mercy

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

This is a sermon about a strange spiritual stance: begrudging the mercy of the Lord. Not only is such a thing small-hearted, but also it bends around to hurt the one who begrudges, because in the end, we all depend on the mercy of the Lord.

My opening text is from our Gospel Lesson, Matthew 20, but soon I want to turn to our First Lesson, from Jonah. Here is my opening text. It is from the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard:

¹³But he [the householder] replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius (the usual daily wage)? ¹⁴Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last 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?" (Matthew 20:13-15, RSV)

And so it is that the charge of begrudging the mercy of the Lord is brought by the householder against those early workers in today's parable. They are offended that the latecomers get the same pay as they do. But, in our day, in our troubled economy, I think we could wish that those early workers would have more mercy on the latecomers. It is true that the early risers worked all day in the heat of the sun, while the latecomers did not. But in their daylong work, those workers at least had the confidence of employment and pay at the end of the day. But the late workers had to make it through that day with anxiety, wondering whether they would ever be hired, wondering how they were going to be able to feed their families. There is sorrow in the words of those later workers:

⁶And about the eleventh hour he [the householder] 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."

Pity the unemployed. Pity the underemployed. Pray for them all. And if their circumstances should improve, let us not begrudge them their blessings.

FATHER MAPPLE

So, that is one case of begrudging the mercy of the Lord. The daylong vineyard workers begrudged the mercy of the landowner on the partial-day workers.

Now, let's consider the prophet Jonah. He too begrudged the generosity of the Lord:

¹But it [the LORD's willingness to forgive Nineveh] displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And 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. (Jonah 4:1, RSV)

With this prayer, Jonah placed himself in more danger than ever he was back when he was praying from the dark belly of the whale¹. With this prayer, Jonah begrudged the mercy of the Lord. But that is a mercy upon which we all depend.

Someday, for our spiritual benefit and for the fun of it, I mean to preach Father Mapple's sermon about this man, Jonah. You might remember Father Mapple from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. I have a friend - a pastor down in Pennsylvania - who preaches Father Mapple's whole sermon from time to time. But that sermon is mostly based on the first part of Jonah, on Jonah and the whale, while our story is from the second part. So, I'm only going to share a few words of that mighty sermon with us.

Let me set the stage a little. Father Mapple was a favorite preacher among the whalemens of New Bedford, Massachusetts. He himself had been a sailor and a harpooneer in his youth, but that was years ago. For many years now he had dedicated his life to the ministry.

Imagine a high pulpit -- one with many steps to reach it, like they have at nearby St. Ignatius Loyola Church. Father Mapple had such a high pulpit, but to get into it, he climbed, not stairs, but a hinged ladder, up and up, like climbing the mast of some sailing ship. And when he reached the top and entered his pulpit, he pulled that hinged ladder up after him, as if retreating from the world and isolating himself entirely with the word of God.

His pulpit was shaped like the bow of a ship. And well it should be! Melville puts the point well:

What could be more full of meaning?--for the pulpit is ever this earth's foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God's quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favourable winds. Yes, the

¹ A moving idea from Phillip Cary's recent theological commentary: *Jonah* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), page 129.

world's a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.

So Father Mapple climbs up his ladder into his pulpit. He is surprisingly spry for an old man, but once you learn to go climbing around on a ship, I guess you don't forget how.

The passage in his sermon I want to repeat concerns the law of God, and how that law, at some point in *each* human life, is a hard command. Father Mapple, then, preaches so:

As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai [Jonah] was in his wilful disobedience of the command of God--never mind now what that command was, or how conveyed--which he found a hard command. But all the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do--remember that--and hence, he oftener commands us than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we must *disobey ourselves*; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists. (my emphasis)

Now, the thing about Jonah is that in order to obey God, he had to disobey himself. Especially he had to disobey the bitterness of his own heart. As far as Jonah was concerned, the great city Nineveh was full of enemy folk. He did not want the Lord to spare them, but to destroy them. But Jonah knew about the Lord that he inclined toward mercy. And when the people of Nineveh repented with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes, and the Lord then forgave them, well, it made Jonah mad. He was fit to be tied. He kept complaining:

²And 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.

³Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:2-3, RSV)

These are not the mad ravings of an out-of-control man, and his words are not careless, but carefully chosen. What Jonah is explicitly rejecting is the Lord's own heart. Jonah is deliberately rejecting our Lord's self-revelation. That is, Jonah is rejecting the cherished teaching of Israel revealed to Moses long beforehand:

⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him [Moses] there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and

transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:1-7, ESV)

Do you see what I mean when I say that when Jonah prayed his bitter prayer to the Lord complaining about the Lord's mercy, he was thereby placing himself in more danger than ever he was when he prayed from the dark belly of the whale? For with his bitter prayer, Jonah was undoing his own hope of salvation. For it was with Jonah as it is with any of us, that our hope is in the Lord and in his mercy. As the dear hymn puts it:

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
no merit of my own I claim,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.

Refrain

On Christ, the solid rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less (LBW 294)

FORGIVING OURSELVES AND OUR NEIGHBORS

Begrudging the mercy of the Lord is a serious matter. It has consequences both for ourselves and for others, for we are able to resist mercy on both -- on both ourselves and on others.

First, have some mercy on yourself. Do not gainsay the Lord for his willingness to forgive your sins. No matter how deep those sins and how scarlet their stain in your life, do not doubt the ability of the Lord to forgive those sins and to forget them. If the Lord has spoken his absolution to you, do not dishonor him by failing to forgive yourself.

And as for our neighbors, if they are penitents, and if they would love to be forgiven by us, then it would conform to the pattern of Christ that we should forgive them. If we refuse to forgive others, we thereby cut off the limb on which we sit. Such readiness to forgive is built right into the prayer our Lord taught us: "And forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive* those who trespass against us."

¹⁴For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: ¹⁵But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15, KJV)

WE ARE ALL BEGGARS!

When the mighty pen of Martin Luther finally ceased, and he laid that pen down, these were his last written words before he died: “We are all beggars!” In a way, it is his most profound line. It perfectly summarizes his theology. No matter what our merits or accomplishments, they are insufficient to save us. In the end, we all depend on the mercy of the Lord.

So, Jonah, do not gainsay the Lord his willingness to forgive old Nineveh. Likewise, you and me. The One who says, “I AM who I AM” is the one who will be what he will be, and that is to our salvation. He is a God who requires righteousness from us, and will have it, but who also stands ready to forgive the penitent and get that one back on track:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...

... through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.