In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

In much of this morning’s sermon, I mean to speak of Jonah, from our First Lesson. But my opening text comes from our Gospel Lesson about the workers hired at various points during the day. Those who were hired first receive the same pay as those who were hired at the eleventh hour. They receive the pay they were promised. They receive it fair and square. But they complain about the latecomers receiving the same pay too. The master answers them by pointing out that he has done them no wrong since he has paid what he promised. And then the master asks them a question that searches their heart. It is a question about begrudging. The text goes this way:

\[15\text{Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?}^\text{"} \text{(Matthew 20:15, RSV)}\]

When I have a good old word I am trying to explain I often go to a good old dictionary to get some help. My good old word this morning is the word “begrudge,” and my good old dictionary is Noah Webster’s from the year 1828.\(^1\) Webster teaches us that to “grudge” someone is...

“to be discontented at another’s enjoyments or advantages.”

That is what is wrong with the early workers in this morning’s Gospel story: they are “discontented” at the grace shown to the eleventh-hour workers. Those later workers were not given a fortune. They were simply given a denarius. But a denarius is what they needed to make it through the day. If wife and children at home were to eat, even the eleventh-hour workers needed that denarius. In his generosity, the master gives them all a denarius. But the early workers begrudge this mercy.

Begrudging someone is not quite the same as envying them. It is worse! There is a spirit of bitterness in the begrudging one. It is not simply that the begrudging one wishes he had what somehow else has. That would be envy.

\(^1\) \textit{American Dictionary of the English Language}, Noah Webster 1828. Published by the Foundation for American Christian Education, copyright 1967 and 1995.
But grudging goes beyond that. The grudging one would strip away and deprive the other one of his advantages and enjoyments. The grudging one is “discontent” that the other person should have blessings in life — discontented that others should have the denarius.

Let us not do that. That is the theme of this sermon: let us not begrudge others. Because if we do, then we are sunk! If we are discontent that others should have blessings in life, then what is to become of us? For whatever blessings we have, and whatever hopes we have for the future, come from the hand of our Maker, and those blessings go beyond our deserving. Let us not begrudge the good things in the life of anyone lest we thereby undo our own hopes in life.

To explore this human temptation to begrudge others, let us look at this morning’s story about Jonah. The Old Testament book of Jonah is one of the most gentle books in the whole Bible. The book deals with rascals – both the people of Nineveh and Jonah himself – but the Lord deals patiently with all of them. The Lord loves and worries about everyone in sight, even the animals, and so we have that great loving line at the end of our reading. The Lord says this:

11And should not I pity 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 much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11, RSV)

Do not forget the cattle. Do not forget the cats and dogs, the kittens and puppies, in that great city of Nineveh. Likewise, in your personal prayers, do not forget all the creatures in God’s world. Pray for yourself and for your family, naturally, but also pray for the Lord’s whole creation, including all those creatures in the forests and meadows, lakes and rivers and oceans of our world. They are worthy of prayer too. And so the Lord has pity not only upon the people of Nineveh “who do not know their right hand from their left,” but also for the cattle.

Now, one of the first things I must tell you about Nineveh is that it was a wicked town. I bet there were good people in it, for there seem to be good people everywhere, but by and large Nineveh found itself hated by much of humanity. It was the chief city of the Assyrian Empire – an empire that would conquer and demolish many a land, including Israel. One Bible scholar describes the town this way:

...Nineveh was the symbol of overwhelming and ruthless power of empire. Its pride in its power is set forth in
Isaiah 10:2-4, and Nahum depicts it as a “city of blood” (Nah. 3:1) and of “endless cruelty (3:19).”

It is to this town that Jonah is commanded to go, to preach, and to give them a chance for repentance.

But Jonah does not want to do this. He does not want to give that enemy city any chance for repentance. So that rascal Jonah runs away. He takes to a ship and sails in the opposite direction from Nineveh. You know that that did not work out. That is why Jonah ended up in the belly of the big fish. So Jonah reluctantly heads to Nineveh. The Lord rescues him from the big fish and sends him again along his way to the town Jonah seems to hate.

When Jonah reaches Nineveh he preaches a hard sermon. There is no grace in his sermon. He simply marches through the city thundering out disaster:

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. (Jonah 3:4, KJV)

This is not a winsome sermon. It is not calculated to draw the people to repentance and amendment of life. In fact, Jonah’s sermon speaks of a done deal:

Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

He does not say, “You had best repent because if you do not then in forty days your town shall be overthrown.” No, there is no ray of hope in this sermon. Jonah simply announces looming disaster.

Now we come to one of my favorite lines in St. John Chrysostom. He points out that when the people of Nineveh heard the dreadful preaching of Jonah, they could have fled from their town, but instead they fled from their sins. Chrysostom puts the point this way:

They had heard that the buildings would fall, and yet they fled not from the buildings, but they fled from their sins. They did not depart each from his house...but each departed from his evil way; for, said they, “why should we think the walls have brought forth the wrath? We are the causes of the wound; we then should provide the

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Therefore they trusted for safety, not to a change of habitations, but of habits.\(^3\)

I love that line: they change not there habitations, but their habits. They did not flee to the hills, instead they change their manner of life. They did not flee the city, but rather they mourned their sins:

> Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?” (Jonah 3:9, RSV)

Therefore God, in his mercy, spared the city. The first line of our text tells of God’s mercy:

> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:10, RSV)

And this, Jonah begrudged. There is a kind of bitterness in Jonah’s soul. He himself had disobeyed the Lord, had fled from the Lord, and finally obeyed the Lord only because he was compelled to do so. Jonah has no love or mercy in his soul for the Ninevites. Even in his obedience Jonah is not walking in the spirit of God. Yet the Lord in this gentle book never seems to lose his temper with Jonah.

Jonah has a complaint against the Lord. He believes that the Lord is too merciful. Listen again to Jonah’s complain:

\(^2\)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. \(^3\)Therefore 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)

The man seems blind to the irony of his complaint. It is precisely because the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, that Jonah himself lives. Rather than dying in the tummy of the whale, he lives! He has a new day before him. The mercy of the Lord toward the

\(^3\) St. Chrysostom: the Homilies on the statues to the people of Antioch. Homily V.
Ninevites is precisely the mercy by which Jonah lives. It is the mercy by which you and I live too.

As it turns out, neither the story of Jonah nor of the workers at various times of the day is finished. There is more to tell. In particular, there is the story of the cost of such mercy for our God. The cost is the cross! I do not want to speak in an impious way, but I can almost feel a shudder in the mighty heart of God as he spared Nineveh. Such mercy comes at a price. The price is not silver or gold, but the very life of our Lord Jesus. He did no wrong. He is worthy that you and I should be spared from the wages of our sins if he calls us “friends.” And he calls us “friends” indeed in our baptism and each time we meet him at the Holy Communion.

Let us not, then, begrudge others. Let us not be discontent with the blessings the Lord gives to them. Let it be with us as the apostle says, that we should have sympathy with others:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. (Romans 12:15, RSV)

The Lord blesses us too with his mercy and therein lies our hope of eternal salvation, 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.