

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 24, 2023  
Jonah 3:10--4:11, Matthew 20:1-16  
A Soul-Searching Question for Jonah and for Us

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

In this morning's Gospel Lesson about the workers in the vineyard, we find that Jesus calls people all day long to come and work with him. From morning, till the end of day, Jesus is calling people. Measuring these things, not in terms of the *day*, but in terms of the span of our *lives*, Jesus calls us when we are children — something I hope our children will take seriously. So, he calls us when we are children. He calls us when we are grown-up and in full strength. And he calls us when we are elderly and frail. We never seem to be beyond usefulness to Jesus. He calls us at each stage of life and is pleased with us whenever we answer his call, even if it is rather late in the game for any of us.

Well, one of the people the Lord called to be a worker in his vineyard was Jonah of old. But in calling Jonah, the Lord was calling an unwilling worker indeed. That is the fellow I want to talk about in this sermon: Jonah. Especially I want to try to reckon with that soul-searching question the Lord asks Jonah at the end of our reading. The question goes this way:

<sup>11</sup>And should not I pity Nin'evah, 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)

I love that mention of the cattle. We human beings naturally think that the world revolves around us and that we are our Maker's chief concern. But what about the cattle? What about the lions and bears and tigers? What about the redwood forests in California? What about our rivers and lakes and our sky? St. Paul says that creation is groaning (Romans 8:22). It is groaning because of us, waiting for our liberation. In the New Jerusalem, things will also be better for the cattle and lions and bears and trees and all of God's creation. So, that's something good to look forward to.

Back to Jonah. The striking thing about Jonah is that he knows that the LORD is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2). He knows it, and he does not like it. He is pretty mad about it. In today's story, Jonah figures that he might just as well up and die, he is so upset (Jonah 4:3).

And, to be fair to Jonah, there is some justice on his side. This is a serious matter, because it concerns you and me too. There is something in Jonah's heart that we might well find in our own hearts too. The question has to do with overwhelming evil. Are we really content that reality should forgive evil? Are we willing that our God should forgive the evildoer? Are we willing to forgive the evildoer if that person repents and seeks our forgiveness?

I think a little historical perspective should help us to understand Jonah's position. The LORD has sent Jonah to preach to Nineveh. But that great city is the capital of the dreadful Assyrian Empire. The prophet Nahum calls Nineveh a "bloody city." And so we read his words about that town:

<sup>1</sup>Woe to the bloody city,  
all full of lies and booty—  
no end to the plunder!  
<sup>2</sup>The crack of whip, and rumble of wheel,  
galloping horse and bounding chariot!  
<sup>3</sup>Horsemen charging,  
flashing sword and glittering spear,  
hosts of slain,  
heaps of corpses,  
dead bodies without end—  
they stumble over the bodies!

Indeed, the ruthless Assyrian Empire will crush Israel — the Northern Kingdom — and erase it from the pages of history going forward. That happened in 721 B.C. Assyria had a cruel policy of deporting conquered people — ripping them away from their homelands and replacing them with other conquered peoples, essentially salting the earth, ensuring that the original nation could not arise again. Nineveh is the capital of this Assyrian Empire. Nahum calls Nineveh a city of "unceasing evil," plaguing the world (Nahum 3:19).<sup>1</sup>

What I want us to understand is that this is no dainty matter of forgiveness. Nineveh is not some basically good-hearted city that has briefly gone wrong. No, Nineveh is the implacable, pitiless enemy, and the LORD has sent Jonah to this town, to preach to *this* town. Jonah does not like it.

Jonah tries to run away from the LORD and his mission. That's how Jonah ends up in the belly of the whale. But once Jonah understands that there is no escaping his duty, he does go to Nineveh and preach to that town. But it is not a very encouraging sermon. In fact, it holds out no hope for that town. We read of Jonah's fierce sermon in Chapter 3:

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<sup>1</sup> We can read about these things in Elizabeth Achtemeier's article in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts: 001* (pp. 484-485). Kindle Edition.

Now Nin'evah was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. <sup>4</sup>Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, "Yet forty days, and Nin'evah shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:3-4, RSV)

Jonah does not hold out the possibility of repentance and forgiveness. He simply announces that Nineveh shall be overthrown.

But, to use a lovely saying of St. John Chrysostom, the people of Nineveh "changed not their habitations, but their habits." I mean, if you believe what the prophet is saying, if you believe Jonah that your city is about to be overthrown, one thing you can do is up and move. Your family is dear to you. If you believe that destruction is coming, it is understandable if you pack up and go live with relatives in another town. But the people of Nineveh did not do that. They did not flee their house, but rather their sins. They repented. From the least to the greatest, they all repented, fasted, and wore sackcloth. From the king all the way to the animals: they all wore sackcloth, because, as the king put it:

... let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence which is in his hands. <sup>9</sup>Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not?" (Jonah 3:8, RSV)

And the LORD does repent. He does not destroy Nineveh. And this is what makes Jonah mad. This is the last straw for Jonah. He might as well die, he is so furious about the mercy of the LORD.

Has someone done you wrong? During the course of a long life, someone might have done that to you... might have done you harm, even grievous harm. If so, let that trouble be an image for you of Jonah's frustration. He does not want the evildoers to be forgiven. Would you forgive if the one who has done you wrong repents and seeks your forgiveness?

This past Wednesday's midweek Bible story was about the call of Matthew, the tax collector. Righteous folks were mad that Jesus would call a tax collector because such folks were considered to have sold their souls to Rome for money and were often unjust in their collection of taxes. The frustration of these righteous folks became the occasion of one of the most beautiful sayings in the Bible. The verses go this way:

<sup>11</sup>And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" <sup>12</sup>But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are

sick. <sup>13</sup>Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:11-13, RSV)

What I am trying to take in, more and more, is that this saying of Jesus is not mere poetry. It has a broken heart behind it. The suffering and the injustice in this world is something that our God feels with a perfect hatred (Psalm 139:22). In our Thursday Evening Bible Class, we have read the story of the call of St. Paul. Jesus stuns Paul the Persecutor by telling the man that it is he himself – Jesus – whom Paul is persecuting. Paul is raging. He is on his way to Damascus to arrest the early Christians there. But Jesus enters his life. At this stage in life, the Apostle Paul is called Saul. The key words go this way:

<sup>3</sup>Now as he [Saul] journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. <sup>4</sup>And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" <sup>5</sup>And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting..." (Acts 9:3-5, NRSV)

Jesus identifies with those who suffer. He feels their troubles as if they are his own.

We are used to saying of God that he is all-powerful and all-knowing. But have you considered this: The infinite capacity of our God means that he can feel this world's suffering with a perfection that goes beyond the pity that you and I can feel. Yet, this same God can forgive. He can forgive Nineveh, that bloody city. He can forgive Matthew and welcome that otherwise despised man into his friendship. He can die on the cross for you, for me, praying with his final breath, "Father, forgive..."

Jesus would have us to be people who are willing to forgive. He builds it right into the prayer he taught us: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (KJV). "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sins against us" (LBW).

Our world does not have a lot of forgiveness in it these days. Indeed, things seem quite bitter to me — at least concerning questions of politics or morality. But you and I are followers of a Jesus who is ready to forgive. He wants us to be light in this world. He wants us to show a different way of life in this world. He wants us to be people who grant to other people something quite precious in life: a second chance... a second chance, following the example of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.