

Pentecost 16A / Proper 20

September 24, 2017

Rev. Ken Wratten at St Luke's

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Nineveh change their minds at the last minute, and God changed His mind.

Philippians 1:21-30

Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Matthew 20:1-16

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard

Jonah resents that God would forgive Nineveh. Laborers in the vineyard resent that last-minute workers would get a full day's wage for an hour's work; the first is last and the last is first.

Of course the point Jesus was making is that how hard we work, or how long we have been at it, does not 'earn' us the keys to God's Kingdom. There is NO WAY we 'earn' eternal life; that is just not how it works. It is only by God's grace that we are invited to live with God, in this life and in the next life. It's like the song says, *Amazing Grace*, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...

So, accepting the promise that you and I, through our faith, are going to meet up in heaven, we should start preparing ourselves now that we will see people we never expected to be there: some of those "last hour" people. That is comforting news to me for some people I have worried about. For example, I have had some people talk with me over their grief and worry about a family member who never went to church, never prayed, and never talked about God. If this person they loved has never confessed Jesus as Lord, doesn't that mean he or she would not be allowed into heaven?

This parable of the laborers in the vineyard says that God, and God's rules for dispensing mercy, refuse to be squeezed into a box by us; God refuses to even make sense sometimes, at least not using logic that we can understand. Some of the laborers worked a full 12 hour day; some worked only one hour; and all got the same reward. Is that 'logical'?

Because of the reality of God's limitless grace, in heaven we will see some people we don't really think should be there. We will think, "Why should they deserve to be here?" But, by that rationale, I would have to find what I did in life that was so great that I deserved to be there in heaven.

It sure is better for me that being able to spend eternity in heaven is grace-based, and not earned. For instance, it should not be based on a person being really good with words, able to talk their way into God's good graces, convincing God how 'worthy' they are. This short story is an example of what I'm describing:

Every afternoon two monks strolled in the garden of their monastery. One day as they were walking along a wooded path, one of the monks asked the other if he thought it would be a pleasant experience to smoke a cigarette as they continued on

their walk. The other monk agreed, but they decided they should ask the master of the monastery for his permission. The next day as they came out for their walk, one of the monks was smoking a cigarette and the other was not. “We agreed to ask the master,” said the monk who was not smoking. “That is so, and I did,” replied the other. “I asked for permission to smoke and was refused.” “How did you ask?” “I approached the master and said, ‘When I am walking and meditating in the garden is it all right if I smoke a cigarette?’ and he said, ‘Absolutely not!’” The monk smoking a cigarette replied: “You see, my brother, it is in the asking of the question that you were bound to be denied. I approached the master and said, ‘Master, when I am smoking in the garden, is it all right if I meditate?’ and he said, ‘Certainly.’”

My brother Jim has always had a way of saying things that makes the rest of the family smile. That skill kept him out of trouble with mom and dad; not because he didn’t act like a kid, and do the same crazy things Fred and I did, but because he had an amazing skill for taking the tension out of the air when we got caught. When mom or dad would demand, “Why did you do that?” Jim’s answer would bring smiles and a waving of their hands to say, ‘That’s Jim.’ My answer would bring the words, “Your grounded! Do you know anyone like my brother Jim?”

Today’s parable says that the smooth-talking monk would not have a better chance of getting into heaven than the other monk.

Based on our faith, you and I can trust in the gift of God’s grace.

I believe there is hope for the people who don’t proclaim their faith out loud, but God knows their heart; and I believe there is hope for those who never found faith in God, but in that final second of life, seeing God’s Holy Court laid out before them, they realize how real this God is, and how important their decision is; and God accepts their last second decision as fully as the decision from someone who has been faithful their entire life.

I have trust in this story from Jesus, that God’s grace is generous, and people who figure it out at the final second receive God’s full measure of grace.

I trust in Jesus’ words to the criminal on the cross next to him; ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise.’”

I suggest that we avoid judging who will get into heaven; but that we approach every person as though they are all eligible to receive God’s full measure of grace. It will make for much better conversations when we see them in heaven. Amen.