### Jonah 3:10-4:11

 10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

 1 But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. 3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

 4 But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

 5 Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

 9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"   
      "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

 10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

### Matthew 20:1-16

 1"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

 3"About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5So they went.

   "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?'

 7" 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered.   
      "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.'

 8"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.'

 9"The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

 13"But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

 16"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

“Open Invitation”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

September 24, 2023

My brother Adam is always the last to arrive at family parties and the first to leave. Well, almost always. It is as if somewhere along the line he discovered something we didn’t know—as if his arriving just as hot hors d’oevres come out of the oven is a definite plan. For another family friend, it was always as if leaving before the mass of younger nieces and nephews got tired and cranky was a conscious act. We couldn’t change his pattern, even when we tried to give him earlier arrival times; even though it became a long-standing family joke.

There is a race in India called the slow cycling race. The contestants don’t burst out of the gate pedaling furiously but instead they move slowly as possible along a rather short track only a few yards long.  The most skilled racers sit immobile for long periods of time, never allowing their feet to touch the ground.  It turns out that the goal of this race is to come in last!  If you didn't know the rules of this race you would take off as soon as you heard the gun, leaving everyone else behind.  But you would not win the race.  You would come in dead last.  You would have won the wrong race.  Many times, Jesus' message was, "do you really want to win the wrong race"?

In the parable from today’s Gospel lesson, which, coincidentally, we read on Thursday in our Bible Study on Luke, we aren’t reading to discover what fair wage practices were during the first century. We aren’t reading to know what it was like to pick grapes in the hot sun. Jesus tells us exactly why he tells the story and that reason is the same for us today. Jesus adds yet another simple story whose meaning is plain unless we try to apply the rules of this world. What is the kingdom of heaven like? It is like an open invitation to arrive when you are ready, and to be greeted with the same generosity whenever you arrive. For this, we may be incredibly grateful. We also might sometimes find ourselves wanting the rules to be a bit different. When we feel as though we are doing all we can for God, we may look around with wonder at those whose sins are more immediately apparent to others than our own, and we may wonder if it is fair that the invitation is the same tomorrow as it is today.

The truth of God’s grace isn’t about fairness in this way, though. The economy of God’s love isn’t anything like what we know about checks and balances, or about balance sheets. God’s grace doesn’t fit into *our* conceptions of the world and how it should be or is run. Grace is radically different, and thank goodness! You see, in this parable Jesus isn’t painting a picture of a man who is hiring people because of what they can do for him, but because of what *he* can do for *them*. That’s a boss of another color, isn’t it? That’s God. That’s grace.

The story we read from the Hebrew Bible today tells of a similar predicament, doesn’t it? Jonah, poor Jonah wants an accounting that matches grace with behavior, but maybe only to a point. If Jonah himself were loved and protected by God only by a measure of his obedience, he’d be up a creek instead of spat out onto a beach. He’d be scorched and peeling instead of only recently growing faint from the heat. There’d be only a worm and never a vine. You see, he wants justice for Nineveh by his understanding. By his reckoning, they waited too long to repent to be graced with God’s forgiveness. Fortunately for the Ninevites, and fortunately for us, Jonah’s and our reckoning isn’t God’s. God asks Jonah if he has any right to be angry, and we can ask ourselves the same thing at times. Do we have any right to want favor for ourselves and not for God’s other children? We *are* all equal in God’s eyes. Our very lives are God’s gift to us, and how we live it can be our response to that gift. Sometimes, like Jonah when he desperately tried to outrun God’s call or like the Ninevites when they continued to sin, we get it wrong. Sometimes, and also by God’s grace, we get it right. When Jonah gets it right, he answers God’s call to be gracious even to the Ninevites, that city-sized den of iniquity. Even still, we might find ourselves sitting under a shriveled vine of our making and asking some of the same questions that Jonah does. In the midst of great wrongdoing, or in the midst of scads of sinful people—even terrorists, there is redeemable life. Like Jonah, we may wrestle with the goodness of God that demands that we be God's grace to our enemies, and to the innocent in their midst.

The Rev. Barbara Beam is vicar of St. Nicholas Church is Noel, Missouri. In getting to the point of our Gospel lesson for this morning, she also makes clear what is Jonah’s dilemma and opportunity. He too might have asked “What is the Kingdom of God like?: I’m quoting the Rev. Beam here: “If this is the kind of kingdom for which we pray, "thy Kingdom come," then it is up to us to help make it happen, insofar as it is possible, here on earth. What if we really forgave others their trespasses, in the knowledge that God forgives us, and them? What might happen if we stopped worrying about whether we were getting our fair share and, instead, recognized each of our brothers and sisters as God's beloved child? What would be the results if we made ourselves available to be the instruments of God's love to these other children of God, not worrying about what they did or did not deserve? What if we would earnestly pray that God would show us how God wants to use us, and would listen, and would act? You know what? That's what the kingdom of heaven is like.”

Pedal slowly or pedal fast; arrive late or before the onion dip is even mixed. The invitation is open; the table is always set. We need only say yes and show up, but we might also be the kind of guest who helps to set the table and hands out the hors d’oevres. Thank God for God’s gracious hospitality and may we share in loving others so well.