

Lectionary 25 A 2017
The Rev. Donna M. Wright
St. Matthew's Kellers Church
September 24, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

When it is the year we follow Luke's gospel in our set readings, I always go to books by the late Presbyterian pastor and theologian Kenneth Bailey. He lived for 60 years of his life in the Middle East, a son of missionaries. He spent the early years of his career asking the Bedouins and lower class villages about Jesus' parables – what it would mean if someone in their experience did such and such a thing – like the father in the parable of the prodigal son. As I was doing research for my sermon this week I learned that he also wrote on some of the parables in Matthew's gospel – so I ordered that newer book, "Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes." Here's what I learned:

Owners who had managers, don't go out looking for workers. The manager, besides paying the workers, was also supposed to hire the workers. But this owner takes on the task of hiring extra workers for himself. Only, he doesn't seem to do it very efficiently. Or effectively. He makes 5 trips to the corner where the day laborers hang out, waiting for someone to hire them. That is not the only strange detail. The owner promises the first workers that they will get the usual daily wage. That is, a denarius. The amount of money it takes to support a family for one day. To buy food and wood for the cookstove, to get an occasional tool or cookpot or bit of leather to repair a sandal. For the next three trips, the owner promises to pay "what is right," which is vague, at best. The workers could hope it would be the better part of a denarius. When the owner goes out the last time, he doesn't make any promise of payment. Still, the last workers come; they trusted, apparently, that the owner would indeed pay them something. The next unusual thing the owner does is instruct the manager to pay the late-coming workers first. This was as odd then as it would be now. The owner only instructed that the workers would be paid; he didn't issue any particular instructions as to how much each should get. So the manager pays them all the usual daily wage. The full denarius. Enough to feed each worker's family and maybe buy a little needed medicines. What a relief for those who had been waiting on that corner almost the whole day – as well as for those hired at 9 and noon and 3. Not so delightful for those who had worked since 6 a.m.

It is as though the owner wants the early workers to be angry at his generosity. Angry as Jonah was at the generosity of God toward those Ninevites that Jonah hated so much. In these closing chapters of the short Biblical book of Jonah, Jonah is arguing with God about the result of the words God instructed Jonah to speak to his hated enemies. When Jonah first heard where God wanted to send him on his prophetic task, he went in the opposite direction, got thrown off a boat in a storm, and wound up in the belly of a sea monster for three days. Only then was Jonah willing to tell the Ninevites that because of their actions, God would destroy them. After Jonah speaks God's word to them, they repent. And God has mercy on them. Then Jonah is angry. He complains to God using the words I taught you last summer: "You are gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." I taught it to you as a way of praising God. Jonah uses this great scriptural formula as a complaint. "I knew you would be gracious! And I hate that about you, God! Why did you go and forgive these hateful people that I hate? Why do you have to relent from punishing **them**?"

Yes, God disappointed Jonah by being gracious to the people Jonah hated. But God did not stop there. God needed to go farther with this ultra-reluctant prophet. God, in verse 6 of chapter 4

“appointed a bush” to give shade to Jonah. In the Middle Eastern desert, in present day Iraq, Jonah was grateful for the shade. In the very next verse, God “appointed a worm” to destroy the bush, so Jonah wouldn’t have the pleasant shade. And in the next verse, God “prepared a sultry east wind” to blow on Jonah. Then Jonah said something like “Just kill me now.” I’ve had days like that. When I wonder, can anything else go wrong? Would you ease up a bit, God? And you, too, world? But God is not done with Jonah. So God asks if Jonah is right to be angry about the bush that lived only one day. And petulant Jonah says, “Yes! Angry enough to die!” Then the Lord, gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishing, has the last word in the book of Jonah, “And shouldn’t I be concerned about the 120,000 persons in Nineveh,— and also many animals?”

God provides what we need ~ including storms and shade that lasts not long at all. We pray, in the Lord’s Prayer, “give us this day our daily bread.” In Martin Luther’s Small Catechism, he explains this daily bread petition: “In fact, God gives daily bread without our prayer, even to all evil people, but we ask in this prayer that God cause us to recognize what our daily bread is and to receive it with thanksgiving. What then does "daily bread" mean? Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” God provides everything we need

Jonah did what God asked. God relented from punishing, just as Jonah knew God would. The early workers did what the landowner asked. The landowner who kept coming to the corner, to give jobs and dignity to all the workers, was generous beyond their expectations, giving each of them what they needed to live for the day. God is willing to provide what we need. And God is even willing to provoke us to anger, at such fearless generosity to both the deserving and the undeserving. May we join Luther and those late-coming workers in delighted gratitude. Amen