

September 24, 2017
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matt. 20:1-16

RIGHTEOUS OR UNRIGHTEOUS?

In the old days, there were certain stories in the Bible that we thought you could say “everybody knows this story.” All you have to do is watch Jeopardy to know there are a lot of really smart people who don’t have a clue about the Bible. We are also more aware now that lots of people, Christians included, don’t have a clue about the Bible for lots of different reasons. But seriously, doesn’t everybody know about old Jonah, the guy who got swallowed by a whale? Pretty much I think. But there are also a lot of people who don’t have a clue about the rest of the story, which is really the important part.

Jonah was an ordinary guy minding his own business when God called him to go to Nineveh and preach some fire and brimstone to the people because of their wickedness. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and yea, those people were bad. I’m talking baby-killing, virgin burning, rapists and pedophiles bad. Imagine if you got up one morning and God said he wanted you to go to Mogul and tell ISIS that they are in fact going to hell instead of heaven for what they are doing. Literally, that’s the equivalent of what God called Jonah to do.

So even though Jonah is a faithful Jew, he just says to himself “no way.” He thinks he can get away from God by getting on a boat bound for Tarshish which is half way around the known world. This is just the first factoid that makes no sense in this story because Jonah would’ve known you can’t hide from God.

So a storm comes up, the sailors figure out God caused the storm because of Jonah’s disobedience and they throw him over board. He gets swallowed by a giant fish, (not a whale) repents and then gets spit out on the land and does what he was told to do. He is still not a happy camper, but he’ll take the risk rather than end up

in the belly of a fish again. He goes through the streets of this huge decadent City of pagans that would challenge Sodom and Gomorrah as the worst city ever, telling the people that God is going to wipe them off the face of the earth.

And the most amazing thing happens. The people of Nineveh believe him. The king orders everyone to repent, cover themselves with sack cloth, fast and ask God's forgiveness. Here is the rest of the story:

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11¹⁰ When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. ³ And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" ⁵ Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. ⁶ The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. ⁷ But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should I not be concerned about 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 many animals?"

And that is the end of the story about Jonah and the whale. It makes no sense on so many levels it's hard to know where to start. I actually heard a Christian radio preacher spend an hour claiming to prove that it was a true story. It literally happened because it's in the Bible. It was a long time ago and I can't remember any of his actual argument, but I remembered thinking this guy is really angry. Angry at all those people out there, like me and everyone else I know, who say the story is a metaphor with important messages, but not literally true.

So. The hard-working people in the Parable of the Day Laborers are angry at the guys who got paid just as well for hardly doing nothing and they're mad at God for allowing it. Jonah is angry at the Ninevites, because, well mainly because they're heathen Ninevites and he's mad at God for giving them a break. The radio preacher is angry at all the people who don't believe Jonah was actually in the belly of a fish and lived to tell about it. Of course the preacher didn't say he was angry at God, but I definitely had the impression that he really thought God was making a mistake by failing to strike down all us unbelievers—(unbelievers about the fish belly thing, not unbelievers in God).

All this anger all around us. It is not a good thing. Right? Well, let's just start with Jonah. At first it seems his anger is unreasonable. Setting aside the strange thing with the bush, shouldn't Jonah have been overjoyed that the Ninevites repented and begged God's forgiveness? Imagine if indeed God called you to go to Mosul and preach to ISIS terrorists. And imagine if you went and it worked. They laid down their arms, fell on the knees and begged God's forgiveness. You have brought about peace in the middle east. Wouldn't you be saying praise the Lord, alleluia! That's what I thought at first. But you know, God

didn't just forgive the Ninevites. He let em off scot-free. No justice, no punishment. I think, like Jonah, I'd be pretty ticked if that happened.

And the day laborers, it's actually pretty easy to see what they're angry about. They worked so hard for so long. They're thinking those other guys probably didn't get picked in the first round because they were sleeping in or the foreman knows they are not reliable workers. And they get as much for working one hour as the first guys get for 12. That is just not right God.

Then the radio preacher. I can't really come up with any good reason why he was so angry, other than the fact that he is so sure he is right and he is just mad that there are people who don't agree with him. Ask James, I would never be like that. Ok. Maybe it's been known to happen.

Well so there is a lot of anger and we know on one level anger is not a good thing. Clearly, none of these angry people are happy people. But then anger is not necessarily a bad thing. After all Jesus himself got angry sometimes. His most famous outburst being when he turned over all the tables in the temple, and threw the merchants out. But there is a difference.

When Jesus expresses anger, it is righteous anger. In today's world, what the temple merchants were doing would be equivalent to charging people admission just to get in the doors of the church. Most of those people were poor and could barely feed themselves and their families. Not only was the church not helping the poor, they imposed financial burdens on them that interfered with their access to the church-mandated worship practices. Any time we see anger in Jesus' words or actions, it is anger in reaction to social injustice.

The problem with the anger of the day laborers, Jonah and the radio preacher is that theirs is self-righteous anger, not righteous anger. They have not been victims of injustice. God says to Jonah and the complaining day laborers, "it's no skin off your nose if I give these people a break." And it's my decision, not yours.

That Jesus welcomes and loves those who are slow to accept him just as abundantly as he loves the life-long, committed Christian, in no way diminishes his love for the latter. And certainly when Christians disagree among themselves over non-essential questions about how we interpret the Bible, there is no call for angry, self-righteous rhetoric.

Bottom line. Righteous anger is pleasing and acceptable to a God. Self-righteous anger is unrighteous anger and it is never pleasing to God.

When people who historically have been victims of oppression, persecution and discrimination protest and demand better treatment, they are expressing a righteous anger, and inflict no injury on someone who may believe those people are getting some kind of preferential treatment in the system.

However, it is a self-righteous anger on display when people who are members of the dominant social class gather in anger, bearing signs that spew hate and advocate violence for the purpose of intimidating and insulting those people who historically have been victims of persecution.

When those people who have been victimized by the dominant culture respond with anger, it is not a matter of two sides being equally at fault. One side's anger is grounded in righteousness. One side's anger is grounded in self-righteousness. One side's anger is pleasing to God. One side's is not.

When Anne and I were talking about her introduction to the parable of the Day Laborers, she asked rhetorically "aren't we all a little self-righteous sometimes?" Yup. Some of us maybe more often than sometimes. When we are self-righteous, we must be the ones who repent, change our ways and ask God for forgiveness. And then we will know we are forgiven because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.