

Texts: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Don't you just hate it when God acts like God? Twice in this morning's readings – in the book of Jonah and in Psalm 145 – we find this description of God: gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And then in this morning's readings we find God acting just like that. All well and good, right? But where we get into trouble is when God begins to offer that grace and mercy and forgiveness and steadfast love to someone that we don't think should get it.

In the book of Jonah, God decides not to destroy the city of Nineveh because they actually listened to what Jonah the prophet had to say: "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." And from the king down to the cattle, the inhabitants of the city of Nineveh repented their evil ways.

Here is where we need a bit of back-story. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, the super-power of the 7th century BCE. Assyria controlled territory from the Persian Gulf in what is modern-day Iran all the way to Egypt. The Assyrians were invaders, occupiers, war-mongers. Think Nazi Germany marching across Europe. Think what is happening right now in parts of Iraq and Syria. The Assyrians were the enemies of the people of Israel. They were "Those People." In Jonah's mind they did not deserve God's favor – not in the least. Why work so hard to be a prophet when "Those People" are going to be forgiven, too?

"I knew it, God," says Jonah. "I knew that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And I hate it. That's why I ran the other way when You first called me. I wanted to see Your wrath rain down on those Ninevites like carpet bombs. I wanted to watch You smite them off the face of the earth. I don't want any part

of Your love and forgiveness for them. I'm going to sit down over here and stew in my own resentment."

Don't you just hate it when God acts like God?

The book of Jonah is the only book in the Bible to end with a question. God asks Jonah, "Should I not be concerned with Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" In other words, "Those People" are my creation just like you are, and I love them as I love you. Should I not be concerned with "Those People", even if you consider them to be your enemy?

Maybe the sermon that you would really like to hear is this one: "Those People" are going to hell, but we are going to heaven because we are saved. Believe me, there are a lot of churches where you can go and hear that sermon. That is what Jonah wished would have happened. God is on our side, right? God should save us and smite them. "Those People" can be as far away as the ancient citizens of the city of Ninevah. Or they can be as close as the hired hand in the next row over in the field, the one who was hired late in the day. The one who was paid a full day's wage, even though he worked for only an hour.

Most of us can remember a particular rite of passage from our childhood – choosing up sides for a game. Two team captains take turns picking players. And usually the first to get picked were the athletic kids who were good at playing whatever game it was. After that came the popular kids whose presence would make it fun to play on that team. Last and always last were the kids who were unathletic and unpopular, the ones who wouldn't make any kind of contribution to the game, but had to be included because the gym teacher said so. Maybe you remember where you were in the order of choosing and how you felt

about that. Maybe you remember what you thought about the kids who got chosen before you or after you.

Once again today, Jesus' parable is an illustration of the kingdom of heaven. And in the person of the landowner, God does not believe that the best place to be is at the front of the line. God isn't interested in showing favor to the ones who are best and brightest, strongest and most popular, the ones who have worked hardest and longest, the ones who live on the right side of the tracks, the ones who have achieved their goals.

We all know exactly what it feels like when "Those People" receive something that we don't think they deserve. It doesn't matter what that something is – equal pay, a free lunch from Closer to Home, forgiveness and mercy. We get resentful. We hear ourselves speaking in the voice of the disgruntled worker: "You have made *them* -- 'Those People' -- equal to us."

But now think about how "Those People" feel. The ones who got chosen last for the team. The laborers who went into the field for only an hour. The enemies who repented and obeyed. They received God's abundant grace ... undeserved and generous. Perhaps it feels overwhelming. Perhaps it feels like gratitude.

God asks a second question this morning. Speaking in the voice of the landowner in Jesus' parable, God asks: "Are you envious because I am generous?" God's abundant grace is just that ... abundant, overflowing, lavish. God does not offer equal pay for equal work. God's love and concern, God's grace and mercy, God's reward are poured out for everyone. Deserving or undeserving. Everyone.

This morning we are going to baptize little Jack Robert. We have no way of knowing what kind of person he is going to grow up to be – whether he will be athletic or

not, a good student or not, a diligent worker or not, popular or not, a faithful Christian or not. This morning we are going to see this child be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven -- not because of who he is, but because of who God is: Gracious and merciful. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love.

This morning God is going to welcome Jack as a worker in the vineyard. But that welcome is not based on what he can do. God's welcome is what God does. I am talking about God's faith. God's love. God's unfailing mercy. God's eternal, undying promise of life.

And then a few minutes after that, you and I are going to be given a taste of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus spends so much time talking about. You and I are going to be hosted at Christ's own table, where we will touch and taste the bread and wine of his body and blood. When you come forward, notice this: each one of us will receive exactly the same amount of bread and wine. There will be no more or less for you than for every other person who comes forward. There is no measuring, no weighing out of communion according to how hard you worked this week, or how long you have been coming to church. There is no record-keeping or attendance-taking. There is no punching a time clock or counting overtime hours.

Don't you just love it when God acts like God? Grace. Mercy. Steadfast love. Forgiveness. Compassion. God's own gifts. Given for everyone. Given for Those People. And given for you. God's own body and blood, given for you.