

NO EASY ANSWERS

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

A Collect for Proper 19, The Book of Common Prayer

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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

SEPTEMBER 24, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 20:1-16

Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Both this reading from Matthew's gospel and the one from Jonah tell us something we know: this is not an "easy answers" world.

Jesus tells this parable of the

laborers in the vineyard who went into the vineyard to work at different times of the day but who all received a full day's wage from the landowner. He is not trying to

make life simple. He is not tying something up neatly in a bow.

We see it again in the story of Jonah which, even though earlier it has the fantastical feature of Jonah getting swallowed by a fish, and then spewed up on land, is not a children's story. There is nothing nice about this story. And Jonah is the noble one here – he's doing everything he can to make the world right.

God wants Jonah to go warn the horrendous people in Ninevah to mend their ways to avoid sure and certain destruction. Jonah says no to God, attempts to allude God in several ways, not because Jonah is a bad boy, but because Ninevah is occupied by ISIS or the Nazis – people like that. It makes sense (to us) that the place should be scorched earth. It does *not* make sense (to us) for anyone to go and save them from what they deserve.

So, in the end, they are not destroyed.

In the end Jonah is deeply dejected. He doesn't come around. He doesn't see that God was right about Ninevah all along. In the end, Jonah is angry enough to die.

And we can wonder what's going to happen in Ninevah tomorrow? Are those Ninevans going to keep on the upward path or are they going to go back to terrorizing each other and everyone around them?

What's going to happen in Pyongyang tomorrow? What's going to happen in Raqqa or Moscow tomorrow?

What's going to happen in that vineyard tomorrow? Is everyone going to come to work at noon because you can get paid whether you're there all day or not? Or will everyone come at the beginning of the day because they see the vineyard owner as generous? Will those workers get any work at all? Or will it just be hard times lingering around the cabin door? How will the landowner fare when he walks into the Landowners Club for a drink tomorrow? After he's screwed up the whole system for everyone?

What's going to happen in Puerto Rico or Houston or Florida or Mexico City tomorrow – where some people's houses were blown down, flooded out or collapsed – but others not? Or one person's child was pulled from the rubble alive, but others weren't?

What's going to happen here tomorrow? Are you going to work all day and someone who works half what you did is going to get paid the same as you? Or some jerk was kept on when you were laid off? Is your child going to be sick while another one is well? Is your house going to get struck by lightning, but not the one next door?

We want parables, scripture, preachers to get things sorted out for us. Preferably, give us a secret that others don't know that will give us the edge – like “*Live Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential.*” (Not even Joel Osteen lives at his full potential.)

But Jesus leaves the questions open. Jonah isn't satisfied. Even Paul writes about the struggle of believing and suffering at the same time.

If you really dig into this parable that Jesus tells you can keep coming up with more questions. And that may be the point of it – to let the questions break us open and for the questions themselves to create change.

Being human is a vulnerable undertaking – and we tend to get lost in demanding a particular answer, in contention with other people, with the fairness or unfairness as we see it – good companions for Jonah.

Strangely, this is where faith comes in.

Not faith that is agreeing with a certain doctrine or dogma or every line of an elaborate catechism, not faith that is knowing some information about the Bible or church customs, not faith that gives simple answers to complex questions, but faith that means you can get up and do something today.

Faith that carries us into action in the face of unknowns, the mysteries, the questions that will never be answered.

Jesus did not stand apart from this life we live but experienced and suffered the vagaries and inconsistencies of human life as we do. Jesus was Jesus but he was betrayed and denied by his closest friends, died a shameful death. Jesus was Jesus but Joel Osteen has a jet.

Jesus lived in the midst of the imponderable questions and so can we. Call it faith, but whatever you call it, it happens in real life, no retreating to a holy club.

And for Jesus it meant not simply living, but, primarily, loving. Loving a neighbor, loving an enemy, loving a scribe, a Pharisee, a woman caught in adultery, a faithful Jew, a gentile, a Samaritan, a rich young ruler, a leper....

Jesus told these stories, lets us hear them across the span of time, to awaken us, to remind us that what we need may come very unexpectedly – like the way those last workers into the vineyard got paid. The parable reminds us that there are all sorts of surprises – yes, ones that mean we struggle more but also unexpected abundance and grace (some ability, some resource, some energy) that comes out of nowhere, strength that only

appears at the moment it is needed, only as the step forward is being taken, some companionship or affection or encouragement arising from an unlikely source. Things turn out very differently than what we thought or hoped or wanted – and we go on living: that’s faith.

No, it is not an easy answers world.

But we have this ability to wake up and to pay attention and to experience God, experience ourselves, experience a vast and rich world, and to accompany one another on a journey, a sacred journey, this pilgrimage in life that is all about faith – faith that is action – whatever action we can take – for ourselves, others, our world.



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