

Sermon – Bethlehem Lutheran, Kalispell MT
Mark Gravrock
21 September 2014
Pentecost 15
Jonah, Matthew 20.1-16

Grace and peace . . .

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”¹

I hear that a lot in your churches:

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

I’m not sure I hear anyone taking it at all seriously.

Mostly I hear it at potlucks,
when you’re stuck at the end of the line:

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

My name’s Jonah,
Jonah son of Amittai?
Jonah the prophet?

Yes, yes, Jonah of “Jonah in the belly of the whale”:

I get that all the time!

Everybody wants to know how I survived those fishy gastric juices for 3 days.

Granted, that was a pretty weird experience,
but that great fish was hardly the most important part of my story!

My name, *Jonah*, means “dove.”

Pretty strange name for a guy, you think?

I don’t know why my parents saddled me with that name!

It’s almost like that song, “A Boy Named Sue”!

And as for myself, whenever I thought about our enemy Nineveh,

I felt a whole lot more like a hawk than a dove!

But there is another side to my name:

Sometimes the Bible talks about our people, Israel, as God’s “dove.”

And in my own story,

I became something of a symbol of our people,
a stand-in for all Israel,

¹ Matthew 20.16

a stand-in for you.

More about my own story in a little bit.

But first, I just heard you reading one of Jesus' stories,

one that seems strange and unfair to you:

the one about the workers hired throughout the day,
and at the end of the day they were all paid the same?

Granted, the story seems strange and unfair to me, too,

but I suspect that my world –

even if it was hundreds of years before Jesus –
was closer to Jesus' world than your world is.

Maybe I can help a little.

Do you know what the life of a day-laborer was like?

Maybe a few of you do.

Or maybe you've lived in parts of the country where laborers –

either local labor or migrant labor –

do hire themselves out on a day-by-day basis.

The back-story is what had been happening in our country:

At one time we all had our own land.

But time and chance happens:

Weather, accidents, poorer and richer soil,
differences in people's skills and luck.

Some of us got richer, and some poorer.

Droughts came.

Crops failed.

Some of us went into debt.

And in time, some had to sell out to others who were more prosperous.

You could suddenly find yourself as a hired worker

on land you used to own yourself!

A few landowners became wealthier and wealthier,

and built up huge estates,

while the rest of us fell into greater dependence

and into subsistence farming

where much of the proceeds were owed to the great landowners.

Before long, many of us were reduced to the ranks of day-laborers,

living hand-to-mouth,

depending on one landowner or another to hire us for the day,
 counting on that daily wage, the denarius,
 to bring food home to the family.

Without today's employment and today's denarius,
 tomorrow's food for the family was only a pipe dream.

As day-laborers, we were one step away from disaster:
 You break a leg, or lose an eye, or get too old,
 and all that's left for you is begging.

The story Jesus tells is outrageous:

Who could blame those who had worked all day?
 Who could blame them for expecting more pay than the ones hired at 5:00?
 No business owner today could get away with what that landowner did!
 But back then, we had no labor laws, no unions, no redress.
 Wealthy landowners could do whatever they wanted!

Think about the story for a moment

from the point-of-view of those hired *last*.

Imagine being one of those day-laborers:

You head for the market place early in the morning –
 head for the gathering place
 where the foremen show up looking for workers for the day.

You go there eager for work,
 because today's work is the only way to put food on the table
 and the only way to maintain your own sense of dignity and value!

All day long you wait.

You watch as the foremen come and take some, but not you.
 You're there all day long, ready for every opportunity,
 but each time you get passed up.

And finally, when you've nearly given up hope,
 with but one hour left in the workday,
 this foreman takes you on!

It won't be worth much, you think, this one hour,
 but you snatch at the chance.
 Of course you do!

In Jesus' story,

when the man hired the second group of workers,
 back at 9:00 or so,
 he told them, *I'll pay you whatever is right.*²

At day's end, you line up for your pay.

You last ones, you get paid first,

and to your shock, you get a denarius, the entire day's wage!

You can hardly believe your eyes!

You get the full amount that you and your family need for today!

You know you don't deserve it.

You aren't being paid what is fair:

Instead, the landowner is doing what is right,

and you and your family can hold up your heads for another day!

It isn't fair.

There's no way you can make this fair.

If you and I had been among the first workers,

we'd have been just as angry as they.

When you get right down to it,

Jesus' story is not a blueprint for how to run your business!

This will not work in the business sphere.

Try it out:

As one of the guys at the Wednesday men's breakfast said,

Tomorrow when the foreman goes looking for workers again,

how many of them do you think will be there at dawn?

They'll all wait until 4 in the afternoon!

Jesus' story is not about how to conduct business.

It's an offense to our way of thinking.

Jesus' story is a riddle about God's kingdom,

about God's way of dealing with us.

And it's not about God being fair.

Much of what passes for fairness in our world

is actually managed greed.

That's why the boss in the story asks,

*Are you greedy because I am generous?*³

It's not about God being fair.

² V. 4

³ V. 15

It's about what's *right* in God's eyes.
"The last will be first, and the first will be last."

Okay.

I'm not here today to pretend
 that I have any better handle on this than you do.
 I am Jonah ben Amittai.
 Let me tell you my story:

I was one of God's prophets,
 one of those God would send with messages to others.
 One day, God got my attention with the shock of my life:
*Jonah, go to Nineveh, and cry out my judgment against that city.*⁴
Oh, no! I'm thinking: *Not Nineveh!*

You've got to understand:

It's hard enough when God sends you to your own people
 with a message you know they're not gonna want to hear!

But Nineveh!?

Nineveh is the capital city of our worst enemy.

Nineveh is the Evil Empire.

Nineveh: These are the ones who have been brutalizing our people!

Maybe this will put it into perspective for you:

What's the name of that new terrorist state
 that's taking over parts of Syria and Iraq? –
 the ones that have been beheading your journalists?

ISIS: Yes, that's it.

Imagine that you are God's prophet, and God sends you to ISIS!

That's what I was feeling!

God says,

Jonah, go to ISIS, and cry out my judgment against them.

What did I do?

I ran!

ISIS was this direction. I ran that direction!

I fled to the seaport and booked passage

⁴ Jonah 1.1-2

for as far as I could go in the opposite direction!⁵
 Well, in case you were wondering, it doesn't work to flee from God!
 God cooks up this mega-storm.
 The sailors are sure we'll all go down.⁶
 It's not their fault. This storm is my fault.
 I tell them who I am and why I'm running.⁷
 And even then, these sailors try to save my skin!
 They're not Israelites.
 But they're the ones who show compassion.
 They're the ones who pray to the LORD, not me!
 Finally, I have them throw me into the sea, so that they will be saved –
 and these supposed non-believers pray for God's forgiveness!⁸
 Into the sea I go, and the storm stops!⁹

Do you think even that would get me away from God?
 No way!
 God sends this huge fish – huge as a great sea-monster – to swallow me.
 I know: This is your favorite part.
 It wasn't mine!
 And there I stewed for three days!¹⁰

Those who told my story must have had fun with this part.
 You see, in our scriptures, in the psalms,
 there are lots of prayers where people describe their troubles
 with the image of drowning – of having waters go over your head.
 So the story has me praying a psalm of thanksgiving –
 right there in the fish's belly –
 only for me, all the water language was literally true!¹¹
 Well, I guess I did thank God for delivering me – right there in that fishy belly –
 but I can't say I was very happy with any of this!
 I guess God thought three days was enough,
 and the sea-monster heaved me out onto the shore again –

⁵ 1.3

⁶ 1.4-6

⁷ 1.9-10

⁸ 1.14

⁹ 1.15-16

¹⁰ 1.17

¹¹ Jonah 2.1-9

right back home.¹²

Now the story starts all over again.

I get a second chance:

God says,

*Jonah, go to ISIS, and cry out my judgment against them.*¹³

What do you suppose I answered God this time?

God does know how to get his point across!

Yes, of course, I went to ISIS.

I wasn't happy about it, but I went.

I went right to the center of their power, and I began proclaiming:

*Forty more days, and ISIS will be overthrown!*¹⁴

Oh, there was more to the message than that,

but that was the essence:

Doom and destruction, in 40 days' time!

Now, there are a couple of things you need to understand about prophecy:

First, whenever God would have us proclaim judgment and doom,

God's hope was that people would repent,

and God could cancel the judgment.

What God really wanted was to restore people, to redeem them.

Second: It almost never worked!

We would preach and preach and preach,

and hardly ever did anyone take us seriously!

Well, would you believe it?

For once, it worked!

I preached doom and destruction to ISIS,

to that brutal terrorist organization,

to our hated enemy –

I preached doom and destruction to ISIS, and what did they do?

They believed me!

The people of ISIS believed God;

they proclaimed a fast,

and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.¹⁵

¹² 2.10

¹³ Jonah 3.1-2

¹⁴ 3.4

¹⁵ 3.5

The leader of ISIS heard the news, and he repented.
He made a proclamation to the entire organization:

None of us is to eat or drink anything.

*We – all of us, even our animals! – we will fast and wear sackcloth
and cry mightily to God.*

All of us: Let's turn from our violence and evil.

*Maybe God will hear us and change his mind,
so that we won't perish!¹⁶*

I couldn't believe my eyes and ears!

I was furious!

I wanted them to become a pile of salt and ash,
and I knew now what was coming:

True to form, God saw what they did,
and God changed his mind,
and called back the judgment!¹⁷

I was furious!

I yelled at God:

Lord, I knew you would do this!

This is why I ran away!

It wasn't just fear!

Sure, I was scared, but I know that you can handle fear.

I knew you would carry me through that.

But this!

I know you too well:

A God gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
ready to relent from destruction.¹⁸

I knew it! I knew it! And I'm furious!

Okay, I have to admit I got a little dramatic:

I didn't even want to live anymore!

I asked God to take my life!

¹⁶ 3.6-9

¹⁷ 3.10

¹⁸ 4.1-2

This was one major sulk!¹⁹

I haven't given up hope quite yet:
 Maybe God will still come through for me, for Israel.
 Maybe God will still fry them!
 I go outside the city,
 find a good vantage point on a hillside,
 and I wait – just in case fire still falls from the sky:
 I want to be there to see it!²⁰

It's hot out there in the baking sun:
 one of those most brutal summer days.
 Suddenly, overnight,
 this wonderful bush grows up over my head to shade me.
 Thank you, Lord, I murmur, before I catch myself.
 And then I sour and grouse again.²¹

And then comes this caterpillar:
 I can see it gnawing at the roots of the bush.
 I try to stop it, but more worms keep coming,
 and within another day, the bush dies.²²
 And now the sun is even more fierce,
 and a strong east wind hurls the heat into my face.
 *God, take my life now! This is enough!*²³

And now God speaks:
 Jonah, you're angry and grieved about the bush, aren't you?
Yes! Angry enough to die!

God's voice gets softer:
 Jonah, your heart goes out to that bush.
 You didn't plant it. You didn't raise it.
 It just appeared overnight, and died overnight.
 Think, Jonah.
 Think about my heart:

¹⁹ 4.3, 8

²⁰ 4.5

²¹ 4.6

²² 4.7

²³ 4.8

*If you can care so much for that one-day bush,
is it wrong for me to care about ISIS –
they're violent and cruel,
but don't really know what they're doing?
Is it wrong for me to care about all these lost people
and all their animals?²⁴*

"The last will be first, and the first will be last."

The story Jesus told you today is not fair – not at all.

My story, too: It's not fair:

All the violence, all the brutality and cruelty,
all the wounds they've inflicted on my people –
it's not fair!

And fairness matters!

Violence and bloodshed matters.
Economic unfairness matters.
Common decency toward people matters.

But finally fairness . . . :

Most of my hunger for fairness is my desire to get my fair share.
It's greed and selfishness, and sometimes vengeance, cloaked as justice.

If God were truly fair,
absolutely fair and just to give us all what we deserve:
Hmmm, that's a little scary to contemplate!

"The last will be first, and the first will be last."

What we have instead is a God
who hungers to gather us all up into grace,
who hungers to set us all free,
to redeem us and restore us to God and to one another.
Why else would God become one of us and go to a cross
for you and me,
for those who have worked all day
and those who only got hired at 5:00,
for Nineveh and its victims both,
for ISIS and its victims both,
for us and our victims both?

²⁴ 4.11

I am Jonah.

I'd love to be able to tell you that,

after God encountered me on that scorching hot hillside,

I saw the light, and rejoiced in God's generous love.

But – the Bible leaves my story open-ended, as a question,

so that's where I'll leave it, too,

because then it falls into your lap:

What will you do

with a God who makes the last first and the first last?

Amen