

Jonah 3:10 - 4:11
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

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I love the Old Testament story of Jonah. He is so human, the most reluctant of prophets. God wanted him to preach a warning to the city of Nineveh, saying their evil ways will destroy them. Jonah wanted their destruction, so he ran away, refusing to do the job. He sailed the opposite direction, only for a storm to strike the boat, throwing Jonah overboard. He's drowning, when a giant fish swallows him, somehow giving him air and transportation, spitting Jonah on the shore of . . . you guessed it: Nineveh. Jonah is disgusted, but figures these enemies would never listen to him anyway, so he goes through the motions to get God off his back. To his great dismay, the people in Nineveh do repent their ways, and their city is saved. Jonah is angry because of his resentment toward them. Instead of rejoicing to see the change in his rivals, he's mad at everybody, himself, and God. Jonah complains how this was the reason he didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place, protesting: "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." It's a verse we use in our liturgy for worship during Lent. We get reminded how we're all a little bit like Jonah. Our sense of competition prevents us from caring about the welfare of others, particularly our opponents or enemies. I wonder what Jonah would have said if he could have heard the quote I used last week by President Lincoln: "Don't I destroy my enemies if I make them my friends?"

Rivalry just seems to be a part of our human nature. We continually make comparisons, be it to evaluate ourselves or others. We're tempted to look for the faults in others to feel better about ourselves. We also notice the advantages other people seem to have and think it's not fair.

Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. They agreed on a fair wage, thankful for the job. He found more workers to finish the job later in the day, promising to pay what is right. At the end of the day, he paid the last group first, giving them a whole day's wage. The other workers start calculating dollar signs in their heads, only to discover the rest received the same amount. They grumbled how these late-comers did far less work. The land-owner reminded them how they had been happy with the compensation, asking why they now begrudge his generosity.

Maybe we're a lot like Jonah, not wanting good things for others, feeling very sorry for ourselves. The workers in the vineyard would have been content with what they were given if they had not played the comparison game of envy. Human nature tends to assess a person's worth by measuring the size of one's accomplishments or possessions. Greed & competition may be integral to our economy, but these come with an inherent curse. Things might make us happy for awhile, but learning to be content with we have is a greater treasure. God's kingdom has a different vision of fairness than the legal systems of this world, and certainly far more gracious.

Author Studs Terkel described the typical American attitude this way: "I've got it made because I deserve it. And if you don't have it made, you don't deserve it." In other words: when I receive grace, I assume I've earned it. But when you receive grace, I grumble.

Back in September of 2008, I read a "Chicago Tribune" editorial by Jim Wallis of "Sojourner's Magazine." He described Wall Street's aggressive lending to potential home buyers using subprime and adjustable-rate mortgages, which were then sold to investors at high return, resulting in foreclosures. The Federal government was struggling to bail out Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and A.I.G Insurance. His analysis:

"During the height of the lending frenzy, many people got very rich. Now with the collapse, experts say the most likely result will be further tightening of credit and lending standards for consumers and businesses. Home, retail & business loans will become more expensive and harder to secure. And the consequences of that will spread to most of America. In the accounts and interpretation of these events, a word is slowly entering the discussion and analysis – greed. It's an old concept, and one with deep moral roots. Even venerable establishment economists such as Robert Samuelson now say, 'Greed and fear, which routinely govern financial markets, have seeded this global crisis ... short-term rewards blinded them to the long-term dangers.'

The people on top of the American economy get rich no matter whether they make good or bad decisions, while workers and consumers are the ones who suffer from all their bad ones. Prudent investment has been replaced with reckless financial gambling in what some have called a 'casino economy.' And the benefits accruing to top chief executive officers and financial managers, especially as compared with the declining wages of average workers, has become one of the greatest moral travesties of our time. ... Left to its own devices and human weakness (let's call it sin,) the market too often disintegrates into greed and corruption, as the Wall Street financial collapse painfully reveals. ...

The behavior of too many on Wall Street is a violation of biblical ethics; the teachings of Christianity, Judaism and other faiths condemn the greed, selfishness and cheating that have been revealed in corporate behavior over decades now and denounce their callous mistreatment of employees. Read your Bible.

The strongest critics of the Wall Street gamblers call it putting self-interest above the public interest; the Bible would call it a sin. I don't know about the church- or synagogue-going habits of the nation's top financial managers, but if they do attend services, I wonder if they ever hear a religious word about the practices of arranging huge personal bonuses and escape hatches while destroying the lives of people who work for them. We now need wisdom from the economists, prudence from the business community and renewal courses on the common good from the nation's religious leaders. It's time for the pulpit to speak – for the religious community to bring the Word of

God to bear on the moral issues of the American economy. The Bible speaks of such things from beginning to end, so why not our pastors and preachers.”

Well, this reluctant preacher may feel like Jonah sometimes, but in the depths of my soul, I think Jim’s editorial was right on target, and I haven’t read many sermons in the “Trib.” It was a keeper. We should pray these Nineveh cities of Wall Street and of federal and state capitol politicians would indeed take God’s Word to heart, recognizing their need for repentance and penance of compassion toward those they have victimized. In truth, however, haven’t we all been guilty of self-interest to the point of diminishing others?

There is much which is not fair in this world, and perhaps it’s time each of us reflects on what message our Lord would have us proclaim. In regard to God’s mercy and provision, Martin Luther declared we are all beggars. If we are able to count our personal blessings, might we come to understand how we’ve been blessed to be a blessing?

Amen.