

September 22nd, 2002

Vespers scriptures: Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matt. 9:9-13
Psalm 105:1-6,37-45, Exodus 16:2-15, Phil. 1:21-30, Matt 20:1-16
The 18th Sunday of Pentecost.

Between vespers last night and our scriptures this morning we have three stories of people who become upset with God because He is too good. I think there is such a thing as being “too good”. Dr. Phil, who has just released his own show on TV, had a show last week on parents who give their children too much. His point was that these children are wronged by the many things they get.

Goodness can have two motivations; love or spinelessness. Sometimes we are too good to people because we don’t have the courage to give/tell them what is truly for their goodness. Some parents don’t have the courage and consistency to battle with a headstrong child and so they cave in. But often the motivation for goodness is true love! Sometimes it is very hard to know our motivation – are we being loving or do we just lack courage? One of my favorite thoughts when thinking about what to do is this – **to err on the side of grace.** When we think of God we need to realize that He does not “err”, He does know. Yet to us it looks like He is naively “too good”.

Armchair quarterbacks are a dime a dozen. These are folks who sit back and critique the moves of everyone else. They way they talk, if they were in charge the world would be run right and everyone would do right! I know about these people – because I am one!

It is hard to believe that there are people who would critique God but there are. Last night in the gospel the Pharisees were upset with Jesus for sitting with tax collectors and sinners at a meal. “Why does your teacher do this?” was their question to Jesus disciples.

In the gospel this morning workers, who have been with the master since morning, are outraged that they got no more than the ones who came to work late (sounds like a union strike for parity!). In essence they said to the master, “it’s not fair that you are so good to the people that came after us!”.

But the third story of someone upset with God because of His goodness is Jonah from last night.

Retell the story.

We have no specific indication from the text of Jonah what the sins of the Ninevites were other than wicked. From history we know that they has attacked the Israelites a number of times. When God called Jonah to go to that city and warn them that He was going to overthrow them unless they repented – Jonah was not interested. When he finally did go all we get of his message is a terse and perhaps gleeful/fearful “40 days and Ninevah will be toast.”.

Something about Jonah gripped the Ninevites and they fasted and put on sackcloth. They turn away from their evil ways and the violence in their hands. And God in turn spares them AND Jonah is angry. In his dialogue with God about this situation he says;

Was this not what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish, for I know you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, one who relents from doing harm. Therefore now O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

Jonah had a “Christian idealism” that could not be bent. He would rather die than give it up. He could not give thanks to a God who was good to the person who repented slightly. God knew these people did not “know their right hand from their left” and so probably their repentance fell way short of what Jonah expected. For Jonah it had to be “the full meal deal”. It would appear that Jonah passed off the scene of history a bitter idealist, angry at God, at least that’s the way the book closes.

What will we cultivate in our lives? “Christian idealism” or “thanksgiving”. When we enter a life with God with the idea we will get rewarded for our successes we set ourselves for a “Jonah syndrome”.

I confess to you that ministers probably struggle a lot with this syndrome. We work hard, think a lot and pray about people. Instead of seeing the little signs of life and repentance we tend to see the failures and the work undone that we envision. We have bought into “going all the way with God” and “doing great things for God” and it is difficult to back up to a good God who sees the little things as progress.

Saturday night we come to pray for the world and God is answering those prayers even as he honored Jonah’s preaching. All we must do is offer up our prayer and our preaching without establishing the result *we want!* Then on Sunday we come to give thanks to God for every little movement we have detected in the world that is of Him. Whether that movement be bread and meat on our table, an enemy who has become slightly kind, a person who has turned to God by some means foreign to us – we bless God.

As we look out on the world “in lowliness of mind let each esteem others as better than himself”. This is what Jonah and the Pharesees did not do! If we can do this we can be Eucharistic!