



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Pentecost 16**

**Proper 20 (A)**

**September 20, 2020**

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

### **Jonah 3:10-4:11**

Jonah has technically done what he was commanded - go to Nineveh and preach repentance. Even though the people listened and God relented, Jonah is livid. He leaves the town, builds a booth, and pouts. God directs a bush to come up to protect Jonah from the heat and Jonah takes that as his due. When the bush withers, he is angry enough to die. "Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks. "Then shouldn't I be concerned about Nineveh, with all the people and beasts in her?"

Jonah is certain about what the fate of Nineveh should be. God's mercy flies in the face of justice, as Jonah sees it. Jonah sees his work as a prophet being in vain because God had relented on punishing Nineveh. He can see only his own notion of what God should be and should do. Indeed, he ran away from the job at the beginning because he was afraid that God would do the very thing God did. And Jonah is angry enough to die.

We each have our ideas about what should happen in situations that outrage us. When our expectations are not met, we can become as angry and bitter as Jonah, or we can be amazed at the mercy that has taken place. Our reaction doesn't affect the outcome; it simply affects us. We always have a choice - solitary bitterness or wonder with others. We can look only at the wrong we want righted or we can look at the bigger picture and see the humanity that did the wrong and its need for healing.

- What situation outrages you right now?
- How do you respond to the notion that God loves the people that outrage you?
- Is it right to be angry?

### **Psalm 145:1-8**

This is an exuberant song of praise. The image that comes to mind is of a fireworks display. Every volley of fireworks is startling and beautiful, and over the course of time, each one outdoes the previous until there is a glorious finale of sight and sound.

I will bless for ever and ever... every day... no end to God's greatness...one generation to another... power, majesty, all your marvelous works... wondrous acts, greatness, great goodness, righteous deeds... The psalmist heaps praise upon praise until the last line ends with the word *hesed* - the ultimate name for God's loving-kindness. The last line also recalls the forbearance of the Lord in the wilderness with Israel, where God stayed with them even as they rebelled and grumbled.

The images tumble over one another in an extravagant paean to who God is. God is too splendid, too glorious, too awesome for human words, but the psalmist is compelled to use words anyway because the experience of God is so overwhelming that it must be expressed. The extravagance of the psalm reflects the generosity of the landowner in the parable. It is beyond comprehension.

- When was the last time you were breathless with gratitude and awe?
- What attributes would you use in composing a song of praise?
- Where in the liturgy could you use this psalm besides between the readings?

### **Philippians 1:21-30**

Most decisions we make are not about choosing good over evil, but rather choosing between competing goods. This is the dilemma that the epistle presents us with today. It is a good thing to be united to God in Christ. It is also a good thing to work for the coming of God's vision for creation. For the writer of Philippians, this choice presents itself as being between dying and being with Christ or living and serving the community.

The decision we make depends on how we understand the kingdom; is it for the eternal future only or does it exist here and now alongside the mixed reality we know as life in the world? There's a way in which this is a false dichotomy - the answer is both/and, not either/or. We are made for union with God now, as well as eternally. God's kingdom is being inaugurated on earth in the present as well as being in the future.

We are called to live within the tension of this paradox. Pointing to God's kingdom, God's dream for the world, is certainly what we are commissioned to do as followers of Jesus. We are called to help bring it into reality as we know it now, transforming the structures of the world.

- How have you experienced the tension of choosing between goods?
- Do you experience choices as mostly that of deciding between or among good actions?
- How do you experience the paradox of the Kingdom being both already and not yet here?

### **Matthew 20:1-16**

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask for God's kingdom to come. Do we really want that to happen? This parable tells us what the kingdom of God is like. When we hear it, many will say, with the laborers who were hired early in the day, "That's not fair!" Our culture says that the owner of the vineyard is foolish at best, paying the latecomers the same wage as the ones who worked all day. That's just rewarding laziness!

Of course, God's ways are not our ways. Jesus tells parables that turn things upside down from the culture's perspective. How are we to understand his perspective on the kingdom? The landowner goes into the town repeatedly during the day to hire anyone who has not found work. All the workers are welcomed, and all receive the same wage. This is not a capitalist work ethic.

The point seems to be that God freely gives to all, regardless of their productivity. We don't earn a place in the kingdom; it is a gift, given without regard to worthiness from the world's point of view. This parable could be seen as an example of what it means to respect the dignity of every human being.

- Where do you see yourself in this parable?
- How do you respond to the actions of the owner of the vineyard? Why?
- Where in your life are there opportunities to hold up the dignity of every human being?

*Kate is an Episcopal Benedictine monastic, a member of the Companions of St Luke - OSB, and serves her community as Dean of Formation and Safe Church administrator. She is currently in her second year in the Episcopal Church in Minnesota's School for Formation as a postulant for holy orders. She lives in St. Paul, where her feline companion allows her to share an apartment.*