

Weekly Reading – Monday, September 15, 2008

Now we look at the lessons for Sunday, September 21, 2008, which is the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 20. Our long journey, summer long, through Romans has now ended, and we turn to a new epistle, Philippians, for a new semi-continuous series. The gospel lesson is the wonderful Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard, which one might say is Matthew's counterpart to Luke's Parable of the Prodigal Son. The typological OT lesson, from Jonah, is a wonderful pairing to that Matthew lesson.

Jonah 3: 10 - 4: 11

Jonah is another of the reluctant prophets. But Jonah's reluctance is different than say Jeremiah, who got tired of proclaiming gloom and doom. Jonah didn't want to find himself an ambassador for a God of grace, particularly to the Ninevites, those dreaded foreigners (note that Ninevah is squarely in present day Iraq). When we pick up the story in today's lesson, Jonah has already made his attempt to run from God, been swallowed up and spit out by the whale, and gone, albeit reluctantly, to Ninevah to preach. In response to one of the shorter sermons in Scripture, the whole of Ninevah from the king to the animals repent. And God forgives them. You might think that Jonah would feel pretty good about this. Think again. Jonah pretty much is operating on a "you-get-what-you-deserve theology," and what the Ninevites deserve, in his judgment, is just that: judgment and damnation. Jonah really cannot abide the fact that God is gracious. God tries to get through to Jonah with the gift of a shade bush, likening that gift to Jonah to God's gift of forgiveness to Ninevah. But Jonah would rather be mad than glad. And he is and fit to be tied. What Jonah, and most of us, forever forget is that we too are recipients of amazing grace, of love beyond our deserving, of forgiveness for which we have no claim. Every now and then my wife will say, "We're so lucky." There's some little Jonah in me that wants to answer, "What do you mean lucky? We've worked hard. We deserve what we get, and Lord knows it's little enough! Look at what such-and-so has!" Gradually, God is reforming and healing me, teaching me that my wife is right. We have been fortunate beyond all deserving.

Philippians 1: 21 – 30

A new epistle, less densely theological and more cheerful than Romans where we've been since June. Paul's warmth and good cheer are all the more remarkable given that he is languishing in some jail, remembering the Philippians with affection. But maybe that's not so surprising? Often, at least in my experience, when life is hard, then gratitude wells up. When we are in hard times, we may then be able to see the blessings. This reading really falls into two parts. First, there is Paul's musings about "Should I stay or should I go?" (song by Clash). Then Paul turns to the Philippians, urging them to stand firm in the Lord, giving thanks not only that they have been blessed with the gift of faith, but that they have been blessed to suffer persecution in the service of Christ. One might preach on how crisis and even loss tend to clarify our vision regarding what is truly important, and the corollary, ease and indulgence tend to blind us. The one thing we most need to be happy is not more stuff, but meaning in our lives or to be more specific, Christ in our lives. Both Christ and meaning

have found Paul and no worldly challenge or trouble can take either away. He urges the same joy for the Philippians.

Matthew 20: 1 – 16

Matthew doesn't have the Parable of the Prodigal Son with its message of grace and the offense of grace (see the elder brother). But this parable conveys much the same message, in some ways more directly and with less temptation to indulge in sentimentality. The parable is designed to get its hearers to identify with those who have put in the whole day of work in the vineyard, probably because most of us see ourselves as righteous, deserving, hard working, and all the rest. The parable marvelously "hooks" our self-righteous, indignant selves. So when those first-hired come up last in line, expecting a big fat paycheck, certainly much larger than those who have worked only one or a couple hours, they are astonished and so are we. It's the same wage all around. Sounds as if Jesus' economic justice cred is pretty shot. But the parable is not about human and economic justice, it is about our standing before God. And before God none of us is righteous (Romans 3), all have fallen short of grace. So the distinctions we so zealously guard between ourselves and others are revealed as empty delusions, which pale in the sight of God. In God's sight, you and I may be the last hired, not the first. We think we were in the first group, but maybe that's not the way God sees it. This parable pulls the rug out from under all our self-justifying ways and perceptions, which is the very stuff of so much of organized religion, wherein people come to think of themselves as "the good people." Religion is undone. Gospel is asserted. We are all surprised, surprised and healed. Healed by grace. Restored to a proper self-understanding and to our right minds.