



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

9-21-14

O.K. – let’s let our imaginations run wild this morning. Take a moment to imagine a morning when you wake in your bed and lie there thinking about the people you know, and the people in the world, and the people you love. And then you consider who you want to pray for and who you want to visit and who you want to send a note to today. As you shower and dress and eat you thank God for the new day and you appreciate the bit of sun on the leaves of the trees or the great colors outside the window. For a few moments while you eat you do some reading about God or about love or about being a disciple. For the rest of the day you take time to visit with people and you listen to people tell you about their lives and you offer bits of hope or care to them. But always, whether you say the word God or not, that’s who you are talking about together. Sometimes you offer other tangible kinds of help- money or shelter or food. Sometimes you offer communion and prayer- sometimes you listen deeply and even cry with someone. At some point you take time to worship, drawing strength and renewal from sacred space and the wonderful silence and powerful readings and prayers. At night, you read from the Bible and the words always speak to you and guide you and you talk to God, asking what you should do next with your life. You sleep with the assurance that all will be well. Isn’t that a wonderful vision of life?

So, then – just what is Jonah’s problem? Why in the world is he so angry that he wants to DIE? Here he is – God’s servant - a prophet- with a close personal relationship with a God who speaks directly to him. “Jonah, do this” Jonah, say this. Jonah, pay attention to me and do my work.” He’s right there, working for God. Why is he complaining???? And just listen to his complaint to God- “SEE God, I was right – you ARE gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing.” This is a problem?? You might think that Johan ought to be happy. Instead he is grouchy– ready to go off and die. Is it because there is no glory, no focus on him and his deed of prophecy? Is he jealous, resentful? He seems to have a lot of passion in his anger. Maybe he harbored a desire to see a massive slaughter of innocent people. Maybe he thought it cool to see this enemy city wiped out and suffering. Is that possible - to delight in the suffering of others, especially when you know you are going to be exempt?

And really, what is going on with those laborers and their anger and complaining? Isn’t their grumbling about the same as Jonah? Is the problem that those hired first really want to see themselves get something better than their fellow workers? Isn’t it fair that they get more recognition – recognition in the form of money. Then they can be better off than their neighbors. Just who are these people who are out there working in God’s kingdom? For that is what Jonah’s life was about. And that is what the laborers lives are about. Did you catch that the Matthew reading started with, “Jesus said, the Kingdom of heaven is like..... Those

laborers were working in the Kingdom of heaven. Their landowner was God. They were God's servants, doing God's work. What better way to spend a lifetime – yet they complain and grumble.

In the book, “Hither and Yon” by Becca Stevens, she writes a bit about our continual standard of – “It isn't fair.” She said her own mother always responded with, “You might as well get your suitcase and move, because it's never going to be fair.”

Stevens writes, “This is not a bad phrase to carry with us on the road, although it's not a tender expression. It helps us to accept all the manifestations of God's love that we encounter. Everyone, having been made in the image of God, is the beloved child of God- the prostitute, the tax collector, the priest, the good neighbor. Everyone is no more and no less than every other child of God. The part that feels unfair to some is that there is no economy of salvation, where points are earned and rewards given. But think about it: How well would any of us do if God's grace were in proportion to our works and beliefs? When we complain that the world is not fair, what we really need to ask ourselves is this: “Why would we begrudge God's generosity toward anybody else in the world, and why would others begrudge God's forgiving us?” Thank God that the world isn't fair.

The next to the last line is the Matthew reading says, “Or are you envious because I am generous?” Another translation I read said, “”Why be jealous because I am kind?” Why indeed - especially if our life is dedicated to laboring in God's kingdom, in being God's servant, in doing God's work. For every moment that we labor for God, every moment that we spend in God's kingdom is for our blessing. Could we be living in any other better situation? Why then do we complain or get angry or evaluate our neighbor?

I think that Jonah and the laborers' anger and disappointment come from a failure of imagination, and a failure of the heart. You see, God's grace is there equally-for those who have been righteous all of their lives and for those who have messed up their lives. There is no place for being condescending or for feeling superior. Jonah wanted God's love and mercy, but only on his terms. So, probably did the vineyard workers. And I think we also find ourselves setting up expectations for God.

We pout when things don't turn out the way we expected- when our programs or plans are not fulfilled. We anticipate and are disappointed. Equality for all is hard to stomach when we really care about our own recognition, about feeling special, or unique. And we get angry – at God, at others, at ourselves.

I don't know if Jonah and the laborers ever figured out the source or reason for their anger. But if we're lucky, when we are angry, maybe we can take time to explore whether we are reacting from wrong information, inadequate understanding, or from an underdeveloped heart. We can consider whether our hearts and minds are centering on the ways of human community or the community of the Spirit. We can start to expand our imagination to consider a world where love and mercy are greater than our human, selfish, destructive anger.

We can reflect on the words from Isaiah- “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my way higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Can we start to imagine that world and work in that kingdom? Can we turn towards the joy it can give us? Can we fill our days with our lips and minds always saying,

Thanks be to God.