

## **Lectionary 25 + September 24, 2017**

Today, our sixth-grade friends will receive bibles. This gesture marks the beginning of their Confirmation journey where over the next three years, these sisters and brothers in Christ will learn and experience something of what it means to worship God, follow Jesus, and be part of the church community. Now, what are you to do with these Bibles? I like what the great English reformer, Thomas Cranmer wrote in a prayer asking that God give us wisdom to “hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest” the Holy Scriptures.

Do that with your bibles “Hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.”

Hear the good news on Sunday morning, read your bibles, underline them, highlight them, mark them up, write in the margins and take the living Word into your head and heart for this story in the Bible isn't just another story. It is God's story and it is your story. It is our story, and it is the story by which we live.

The Bible is rich and complex, and speaks on many different levels, but there is a common theme running through Genesis through Revelation and I think you can describe that common element this way – we encounter a God of mercy.

We meet a merciful God who is merciful ... “filled with compassion, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

And much of the time this strikes us as very good news. It brings us delight, it shimmers, moves our hearts, brings joy and, yes, sometimes it confounds us or confuses us. And sometimes it makes us mad.

Yes, let's be honest. At times, God's mercy “ticks us off” because God's mercy does not fit into our reasonable categories of what we consider to be fair or right.

Just ask Jonah. He's a funny choice for being a spokesperson or preacher for God, because Jonah spends a lot of time running from God. So, when Jonah is asked to preach God's Word to Nineveh, he doesn't share the hope of most preachers that the Word travels directly into the hearts of the people to whom he is preaching.

As far as Jonah is concerned, God should kick the people of Nineveh to pieces because of their evil ways, but much to his surprise, Nineveh repents. They change. They turn from evil and begin to live differently. And what does God do? God repents. God, who always loves to err on the side of grace, changes God's mind about punishing them and chooses to deal with them mercifully.

And Jonah pouts over God's decision. Jonah doesn't mind God's mercy toward him, like the time God saved him from drowning in the sea by taking up residence in the belly of the big fish, but mercy for a whole nation of people? As far as Jonah is concerned, they don't deserve it.

God's mercy is wide and generous and loving and sometimes it makes us mad.

Isn't that the response evoked by Jesus? When he dined with sinners and outcasts, the religious leaders grumbled. When he broke Sabbath laws and put people first, people were aghast. And when we hear parables like the one Jesus shares today, we may grumble or be aghast.

What do we do with the parable of the workers in the vineyard? Do you rejoice in its good news or do you find yourself scratching your head in confusion, or does it tick you off?

A landowner hires workers throughout the day. Some work all day. Some work maybe half a day. Some, only an hour or two. Finally, at the end of the work day, everyone receives the same payment. Whether you worked an hour or twelve hours, everyone gets the same payment. I sure sympathize with the ones who worked all day. They felt it wasn't fair. And it's not! The landowners reply? "Are you envious because I am generous?"

There have been attempts to remove the offensiveness of this parable and explain it away. One explanation goes like this: those who were hired later worked especially hard while those who worked all day went at a very slow pace so that by the end of the day they all worked the same.

There have also been attempts to use this parable to identify the workers. Just who are the first and who are the last? One interpretation says the vineyard is

Israel, and those who come late are Gentiles. My personal favorite is the one I encountered last June during the Reformation tour in Germany.

There in the town church in Wittenberg, where Luther preached, hang the paintings of Lucas Cranach, the elder and younger. On a wall behind the altar you will find Cranach the younger's portrait of the parable of the workers in the vineyard. As you gaze upon this painting, you see the vineyard is divided by a fence. On the left-hand side, you see the medieval Catholics, mainly the clerics, doing a bad job of tending to the vineyard. The vines look diseased or dead. On the right side, you see industrious workers carefully tending a vineyard that is lush and beautiful. Who should be raking the soil? None other than a bemused Martin Luther and the person fetching fresh water from the well is Luther's sidekick, Philip Melancthon. In the bottom left of the painting you'll see workers standing in line to receive their payment. First in line is the Pope and lined up behind him are all the bishops. The Pope looks like he's asking for more money and the landowner is making a gesture of "no."

Lutheran propaganda from the sixteenth century? Ya think?

I am certain this work of Cranach has never figured into contemporary attempts at Lutheran/Catholic dialogue.

You see, when we try to explain God's mercy or make God's generosity reasonable or fair or remove the shock or offence or make it easy or palatable, we invariably make it about us. But the parable is not about us. It's about God whose mercy and generosity defies our sense of logic or fairness or rewards and punishment. We can speculate all we want about the workers coming late or early, but that's well beside the point. This parable is an endorsement of the good news that God's ways are not our ways ... you'll find that verse in Isaiah 55:8

Hear it, read it, mark it, learn it, and inwardly digest it. It's the Gospel truth.

But let's not make it an excuse.

I bet you often feel like Jonah. Who doesn't? You might be struggling to love someone or some people. You know that God loves them, but you would rather

keep them at a distance. What would it be like for you to pray that God's ways increasingly become your ways?

Last week, we heard Jesus say "forgive not seven times but seventy times seven." I wonder how that figures into a spiritual practice.

What would it be like for you to behave like the generous landowner? Let the parable work on you and enter the church's imagination. At the very least, as you've heard me say a hundred times, "Never resist a generous impulse."

Have you read Victor Hugo's classic, *Les Miserable*? If not, I suspect you've seen it as a movie or television program or performed on stage. The last time I saw it was at Ballard High School last Spring featuring some of our PRLC youth.

For me, the most memorable scene happens near the front of the story, soon after we are introduced to Jean Valjean who spent several years in prison for stealing bread from the hungry. Once released, he navigates life in the world in the only way he knew how live before his prison sentence – to steal and conceal himself. We find Jean begging for food at the door of a Bishop. The Bishop invites him to share supper and during the meal Jean asks, "What makes you think I won't murder you during the night?" The Bishop replies, "what makes you think I won't murder you in the night? We'll just have to trust one another."

Well, no surprise, during the night Jean steals the bishop's silverware. The police catch him and bring him back and much to Jean's surprise, the Bishop covers for him. He tells the police that he gave the silverware to Jean and then goes to the cupboard to fetch a pair of silver candlesticks to add to the loot. The police leave and Jean is stunned.

The bishop then says to Jean, "Jean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. I've ransomed you from fear and hatred. It is your soul I bought for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."

This radical and irrational act of mercy released Jean into a brand-new life. I don't have time to get into the rest of the story, but Jean's life from then on is complex

and not without suffering, but one thing is for certain: he has been changed. The candlesticks reappear throughout the story, for Jean keeps them very close to him. They are symbols, recalling that one act of mercy that shaped his future and changed his life.

God's mercy has that effect on people. God's generosity changes lives. You know that. Many of you know that well. We cannot explain it or reason it away or remove its offence, but you know that the God of Jesus Christ works mercy and God's mercy makes all things new.

Earlier, we sang in the Gospel Acclamation, "The steadfast love of God never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end."

That's Lamentations 3:22

Hear it, read it, learn it, mark it, and inwardly digest it. Amen.