

The International Potluck is coming up in a few weeks and it is one of my favorite events at church. Since we are supposed to bring a dish that represents our culture, I brought two different jello dishes last year, fruit cocktail in red jello like my Mom fixed for many a church potluck and a rainbow finger jello. Stephen usually makes gumbo or jambalaya and I know that there are members that are looking for his dish. I also made braised chickpeas, because it's always nice to have a vegan option. Was it a lot of food for us to bring? Possibly. But I know that we are not the only ones who bring a little extra to potlucks to make sure that no one leaves hungry.

But what do potlucks have to do with Jonah and the workers at the vineyard?

The story of Jonah was one I always liked as a kid. I mean, what kid (or adult) wouldn't like the image of a whale or big fish swallowing and then spewing or vomiting out the prophet.

The book starts out much like many of the prophetic books, with God speaking to Jonah and giving him his call. From Jonah chapter 1: *Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me."* What do we expect God's prophet to do? Head to Nineveh. What did Jonah do? Head in the opposite direction! He gets on a ship and God sends a storm. When the sailors decide to cast lots to know who is responsible, the lot fell upon Jonah and eventually he confesses that he is fleeing the presence of the Lord. Then the sailors, at Jonah's suggestion, throw him into the sea where he was swallowed by a great fish. He prays a prayer of repentance and is then spewed on to land. God then tells him again to go to Nineveh and this time Jonah obeys.

Picking up in chapter 3: *So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

By the time the message reached the king everyone was included from people to animals. And so God did not bring down calamity upon them.

I had never before noticed the inclusion of the animals in the acts of repentance of the Ninevites, which God even comments upon in the very last verse. I am a cat person, so I investigated whether domestic cats would have been in Nineveh at that time. The answer is probably yes. So if Jonah could get cats to repent, he really should get the award of being the most successful prophet of the entire Hebrew Bible.

Was Jonah happy with the result? Of course not. Jonah was furious. From verse 2, *He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."*

Listen to those words: Jonah is angry at God for being exactly the kind of God Jonah knew him to be. So then he goes and sits outside Nineveh, waiting for the people to go back to being the sinful people he knows they will become. God has a bush grow up to give Jonah shade, but then when God sends a worm and then a wind to get rid of the bush, Jonah gets mad again. But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?"

And that is where the book ends. Does Jonah finally accept that a God that is abounding in steadfast love is going to be gracious and merciful even to Jonah's worst enemies? Does Jonah see, in the

words of the hymn from last week, the “wideness in God’s mercy”? Do we?

Now we turn to the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. In the story a landowner goes out early in the morning and hires laborers for a fair wage, a denarius. He then goes out again at 9, noon, and 3, finds workers and promises to pay what is right. At five he finds more laborers. When the end of the day comes, the workers are paid, starting with the last to be hired. Much to the surprise of the first to be hired, all were paid a denarius for their work. The first workers complain that it is not fair. The landowner points out that he is paying them exactly what he promised them: ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’” The phrase “are you envious because I am generous” is more literally “is your eye evil because I am good”.

Because of the way this parable is titled in our Bibles it is easy to focus on the workers and ponder who the different laborers could represent. But the story gives no judgment on the later workers, just that they were without work. So, instead, let’s focus on the landowner. There is no indication that the agreement is anything but fair with the first workers. But he doesn’t stop there. He continues to provide for people in his community, by hiring more workers throughout the day, workers who would not be able to support their families otherwise. The response of the landowner to the complaining of the first laborers is evocative of how God responded to Jonah. He uses “Friend” the way that some elementary teachers will with adults that they think are acting like children. He has given them what he promised them and has chosen to be generous to others.

Friend, is your eye evil because I am good?

It seems like God could have asked the same question of Jonah. Does he ask it of us?

Our God is abounding in forgiveness

Our God is abounding in mercy

Our God is abounding in love

How should we respond? We probably shouldn't flee to Tarshish or sit and pout outside the city walls. We probably should realize that we as easily could be the 5 o'clock worker as the early morning one.

Let's look back to last week's gospel reading. We forgive because God forgives us first.

We show mercy because God shows us mercy

We show love because God loves us with a steadfast love.

How do we show abounding love? Perhaps we take a clue from the generosity of the landowner.

Maybe we show love by being generous with our time, through volunteering to help with VBS, or the soup kitchen, or in the choir, or stuffing eggs for the Easter egg hunt.

My Grandmother used to go to the nursing homes and play the piano. She got an award for service to Senior Citizens when she was older than many people she was playing for.

Maybe we show love by being generous with our talents, whether it is music, or teaching, or understanding budgets, or cooking.

When Rosa was diagnosed with cancer at 4 months old, the church prayed for her and for us and then started making us food. We finally had to request a break because our freezer and refrigerator were full with the love of our church in the form of casseroles.

Maybe we show love by being generous with our treasures, whether it is increasing our pledge, or buying an extra bag of candy for Trunk or Treat or by making an extra dish for the International Potluck.

The LORD is gracious and merciful,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
The LORD is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

Psalm 145: 8-9

May we be a concrete display of God's abundant love through our generosity.