

“God Let Them In”

Jonah 3:1 – 4:1; Matthew 20:1-16

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The title of my homily on this World Communion Sunday is: “God Let Them In.” Isn't religion fun? Have you ever noticed as you read the gospels that Jesus had more trouble with religious people than any others?

Talking about religious people, today we met a deeply religious man in our Old Testament lesson. His name was Jonah. Most people have some idea what this story is about. They know that God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh, but Jonah did not want to go and, in fact, took off in precisely the opposite direction. Then there was the storm at sea. Jonah got tossed overboard, and has the world's first recorded “submarine ride” - three days in the belly of a big fish. Finally, Jonah is ejected from the fish's stomach and finds himself on the beach. God asks Jonah, “Are you ready yet?” Jonah grudgingly agrees to go to Nineveh. First point is: you can't escape from God, but there is much more to this story.

God wanted Jonah to have a Billy Graham-style revival in Nineveh ... something that could surely catch the imagination of, and be quite an exciting assignment for, a Jonah-like preacher ...but not Jonah ...not on this occasion. He doesn't want any part of it. And Jonah's reluctance is understandable when we consider the context. Ancient Nineveh was the capital of Babylon, which is modern day Iraq, and old Nineveh was just as much a chaotic and lawless community as modern Baghdad. God's instruction to Jonah was to go and rescue a long-ago equivalent to Saddam Hussein. No wonder Jonah dug his heels in! God wanted to open the doors of God's kingdom and let the Ninevites in! Jonah wanted to close the doors!

God wins this war of words. Jonah, ever so grudgingly, goes to Nineveh and preaches the shortest sermon on record (which may be why it proved so effective): “Forty days more, and Nineveh is toast!” There is no altar call, no invitation to repentance, just this word of judgment. And the result is astonishing ...everyone repents, from the highest to the lowest, from the king to the cows – strange, isn't it, that by the king's decree even the beasts were covered in sackcloth? Anyway, the result was good. We read: “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, God had compassion and did not bring upon them the

destruction God had threatened.” In other words, God let them in!

Meanwhile Jonah goes on to have a “hissy-fit.” I really enjoyed the way a Presbyterian colleague in Greensboro, NC described Jonah’s reaction: “Right on, God! I KNEW this was gonna happen! I KNEW you were gracious and merciful, and I KNEW you would let 'em off. Go ahead, God. Why not just kill me right now? If I get back to Israel and word gets out that you spared Nineveh because they repented after MY PREACHING, I’m dead meat anyway. Saddam doesn't DESERVE to be saved. This is the theological PITS!”[end quote]

The rest of that scene in chapter 4 is quite funny ... you should read it some time soon. Jonah goes some distance away from the city, sits down in the middle of nowhere in a hurriedly constructed booth to shade him from the scorching sun, and begins to sulk. God tries to calm him down. In fact, God also tries to humor him by allowing a fast-growing plant to spring up for a bit more shade. Jonah is so mad he misses the joke - it is a Castor Oil plant! Anyway, God gets rid of the plant the next day by sending a worm to eat it.

The book of Jonah teases us. We never really learn whether this religious fanatic, Jonah, ever gets his act together. But what we *do* learn - as if we had not known it before – is that God's grace extends farther than we would ever imagine and, if we are honest, sometimes farther than we want. God lets all kinds of people in! Dare we think that God will let *everyone* in?

Change the scene to a dusty Palestinian roadside. See Jesus. Hear Jesus. Just before the story we encountered in the gospel lesson I chose for today’s message, Jesus had said: “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Then the parable: A landowner comes to the marketplace where day-laborers are picked up before dawn. "I'll take you, you, you, and you." The workers agree to work for the minimum wage - normally a *denarius* - not much, but enough to feed the family. In this case, the owner of the vineyard found himself needing more and more workers ... probably to beat the coming rains ...so three more times on the same day he hires more people - some at nine in the morning, some at noon, and even some at five in the afternoon, just an hour before quitting time.

The difficulty that many have with this story is the twist it takes at the paymaster’s window. The casual workers who had only been at work for an hour were paid a *denarius*. Those who had been on the job since noon were paid a *denarius*. The ones who began at nine

that morning were paid a *denarius*. Even those who had put in twelve long hours were paid a *denarius*. As you can imagine, they thought this was unfair. But the landowner responded, “Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a *denarius*? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?” That's where that line comes in again like a refrain ... Jesus says, “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” In other words, in God's economy, things are not necessarily as you would expect. Jonah would say “Amen!” to that.

In the end it is up to God whom God lets in ... But one thing seems to be a certainty: there are gonna be many surprises! What if we get to heaven and find out that God has decided to let *everybody* in? What then? “I don't know what then,” I say. After all, that would be God's prerogative. But one thing I can predict: Sadly, there will be some who will decide not to come in. Why? Perhaps because a place that would welcome people *not* just like them would not be heaven at all. Oh well, that will be their decision ...not Jonah's ...not mine ...not yours ...not even God's. In the final analysis, the only person I can exclude is myself. AMEN.