

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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A MOTIVATION EDUCATION

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

September 20, 2020

JONAH 3:1—4:11 | PSALM 145:1-8

PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30 | MATTHEW 20:1-16

A famous experiment that illustrates where our ideas of justice and fairness come from is a fine piece of monkey business. “Pairs of monkeys were placed in adjacent cages where they could see each other, and trained to take turns giving small granite rocks to their human handler. Each time a monkey relinquished a rock, she would receive a piece of cucumber as a reward.

Capuchins love cucumbers, so both monkeys found this arrangement satisfactory, and handed over their rocks with enthusiasm. But then, the handler changed things up. After a few fair and even exchanges, the handler rewarded the first monkey with a chunk of cucumber as usual, but gave the second monkey a grape — the equivalent of fine wine or caviar in the monkey world.

“Seeing that the game had changed for the better, the first monkey perked up, and very eagerly handed over another rock, expecting, of course, to receive a grape, too. But no — the handler gave her another piece of cucumber. To make things worse, the handler then gave the second monkey another grape for free!

“The results — which you can look up on YouTube — were striking. The first monkey just about lost her mind. Not only did she refuse to eat the cucumber; she hurled it at the handler’s face. She then proceeded to bang against the bars of the cage, throw her remaining rocks in every direction, and make furious gestures at her grape-eating companion.

“The experiment has since been repeated using other primates, and the results have been astonishingly similar. Scientists have also studied the development of fairness in human babies, and found that infants as young as nine months old will react quite strongly and negatively to perceived unfairness.”

We can see that, whatever equity and justice is, it is hardwired. As a child, no doubt, as a matter of survival. And in the end, no matter what age, a matter of how we compare our condition with the condition of others.

The parables Jesus tells are never meant to be allegories. For instance, in our gospel this morning, the King is not God. And the story is not just about Jews and Gentiles, who got here first and what happens to the latecomers. Jesus wants us to imagine the kingdom more deeply. A parable lays down a comparison for the sake of argument. Looking into the future, Jesus winks at us and asks: what if “the first” are privileged descendants of the Mayflower pilgrims and “the last” are today’s unwanted immigrants?

Jesus needs us to imagine, to see our world in a different way. The King does seem to be all powerful. He does have this interest in “the work.” He is always going out and finding people. He always shows up;

he never gives up on anyone. Still, the King is only a steward, a representative. God stands outside how justice and fairness is defined.

The story is a setup so the King can ask just one question about how we see the world. Are you envious because I am generous? Literally, how are your eyes? Do you have an “evil eye?”

It is telling that no one questions the King about the fairness of the daily wage. Nor does he care how anyone feels. He is dismissive of real issues of equity and justice. He becomes in fact condescending. His voice cuts, with sarcasm: “Friend.” Pal. Bud. Bro. Because I am generous, do you have an evil eye? Who are you comparing yourself to?

Jesus tells his disciples this story just before he will enter Jerusalem to be betrayed. He needs them to wrestle with why they have followed him, and whether they will continue to do so once they face opposition and suffering. He wants us to wrestle with the same question. Why have we followed him? What is our task? Why waste time comparing ourselves to others? The key thing is to know who we are and what the work is.

This parable questions, and then reaffirms our identity as Christians, as followers of Jesus.

The story of Jonah is like a stand up comedy special based on the most outlandish thing any Jew would think possible. That God would have mercy on the most powerful and oppressive city in the ancient world Nineveh. As God announces his intention for Jonah to go and have the city repent, and when we learn that it is the King himself who is the one who listens to him, the crowd is groaning, crying, laughing. Impossible! Ridiculous! Outrageous!

The story is not about Nineveh. It is about Jonah dealing with what God really wants for Nineveh. Not to mention the animals that God does not want to destroy – and the environment and maybe just the whole created world.

We are only useful to God if we can see rightly who God is and his heart for the world. We like to say: God is good. And follow it up with: All the time. But do we really believe it? Can we always see it? Envy and jealousy cloud and distort our vision. Green eye. Pink eye. Evil eye. If we are captive to it, we just can't see a thing. We are distracted by monkey business. If we focus on the grape of another, we will miss the good gift of the cucumbers that God has for us every day. We will lose our minds.

We will forget who we are.

Identity is the key to motivation. Researchers have found that altruists, real Good Samaritans, are regular folks who just don't think of turning away from someone in need. They will often say: "it is just how we were raised." Also, apparently, if you tell someone they should go vote, you are wasting your breath. But if you connect with someone, and get them to see that they are the kind of people who care about a place and its freedoms, they look in the mirror and say: I'm the kind of person who votes. And they end up voting.

Jesus has blessings for us to carry to others. He needs us to know who we are. The world gave us the name "Christian." We are more than that. We are literally "followers of Jesus", who imitate his way and his walk.

Paul, who finds himself in prison, tells his little church in Philippi that they too may find themselves suffering for the sake of Christ. Paul dares them to feel this: "To live is Christ, to die is gain." Even in prison, in our trials, in Christ, we are never alone, never discounted.

It's all about who you think you are. Are you just a day laborer hoping to get enough for a sandwich, beer and cigars? Or are you in for the joy of being with Jesus, blessing this world with love and care you bring to it, because that is just who you are - a follower of the anointed one.

I pray for a deeper knowledge of who we are in Christ. I pray we will not compare ourselves to anyone else. I pray we will each see with clear eyes the true joy of how God has asked us to live, what God has asked us to do. Amen.