

Pentecost IXX; Proper 20a  
September 21, 2008  
Jon 3.10-4.11; Mt 20.1-16  
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It has always been a part of the promised “American Dream” that people who work hard enough, regardless of how humble their circumstances, can achieve the loftiest of goals.

How often in American history have we celebrated the impressive *From Log Cabin to White House* sort of journey. And in this election year more than ever, we are seeing the long-time obstacles of race and gender being overcome.

We always seem to be touched and inspired by those who work hard and succeed... and yet never forget their roots. It is their *authenticity* and *humility* that we admire.

But I would suggest to you that far more often, people who scrape and dig their way from poverty and hardship would much sooner forget all the trappings of their upbringing.

When our manners and accents get a little polished up, we find a way to pretend that we have no idea why our country cousins talk so funny!

When we have managed to stumble our way into respectable middle age, we rail against “those teenagers” forgetting all about our own youthful indiscretions.

And if our portfolios achieve a certain level of success (Lehman Brothers stock options notwithstanding) we find that we can afford to build a lovely little world of houses and cars and the *right* kind of people to insulate us from whatever embarrassing details we would sooner forget. Little Jimmy Gatz slips seamlessly into the world of Jay Gatsby... erasing the skeletons of poverty, ethnicity, and disappointment.

And by affecting this new persona, we somehow manage to lose all sense of *empathy*... for whole groups of people... who are frighteningly like ourselves.

That, of course, is the point of this morning’s Old Testament lesson. Jonah did not have a smidgeon of compassion for the Ninevites. The Lord offered him the opportunity to seek these lost souls so that they too could have a share in the redemption of Israel. But Jonah was not interested in saving souls. He was not interested in anything except his own comfort and welfare.

He had booked his cruise to another port, and had no intention of changing his mind.

But then came... shall we say... an intervention. The stormy sea. *Man overboard!* A man swallowed alive by a great fish whose “sense of direction” was remarkably attuned to that of the Almighty.

And so it was that Jonah, smelling of seaweed and fish breath, found himself roaming the coast of Nineveh, speaking his half-hearted message of repentance...and then stationing himself on a high hill, hoping against hope that God Almighty would send down fire from the sky, and wipe these pagan wretches off the face of the earth.

It never once occurred to Jonah that he and his people were just one degree of separation from the very people he now scorned. *His people* had been idolaters. *His people* had committed acts of great immorality. And beside all that, it didn’t seem that Jonah was a particularly faithful man himself... if his propensity for disobedience is any indication.

Nonetheless, he felt immensely superior. And when God-true to form-proved himself to be merciful, Jonah was livid. *After all the trouble you have put me through, and you are not even going to give me the satisfaction of seeing these wretches killed? You can't help yourself, can you? This is just like you! I knew that you were merciful and forgiving and abounding in steadfast love! You make me mad enough to die!*

*Ah, Jonah. You just don't get it. You have more sympathy for an insipid shrub than you do for a whole country. But you don't even work for the plant the shades your bald head from the sun... and certainly you don't deserve it! So why do you begrudge my generosity? I will love whom I will love....*

And, of course, we can find exactly the same point in our Gospel parable.

Jesus, the master story-teller, must have tired of all the questions from the well-connected religious folk...

*Rabbi, why do you spend so much time with THOSE sorts of people! Dinners with tax collectors and sinners... Conversations with prostitutes... Don't you know what people are saying? Don't you care what they think?*

I would also imagine that Our Lord had, on many occasions seen the big crowds in the unemployment line. As in all things, he was sympathetic to their plight... and more than a little amazed at the hardness of hearts of others, for whom the poor and needy were all but invisible.

And so he told his story. Those who bore the heat of the day... and those hired at only the last hour... got exactly the same wage.

And of course, this is not just a little exercise in economics. It is a big fat mirror held up in the faces of all who forget where they come from... and who forget that even the hair of their heads and the breath in their lungs is a gift given beyond their deserving.

*Do not begrudge my generosity, says the Lord. I will love whom I will love...*

Truth be told, this is the most important lesson for a Christian to know, and it is the single most transforming aspect of our spiritual development.

In order to know Christ's love, we must first be aware of how much he has saved us **from**. If we cannot sing *...that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost but now I'm found...* then we haven't really "gotten it" yet.

But of course, all it takes is a little self-examination... And the willingness to be honest with ourselves. And when we are honest, our question is not, *Rabbi, why do you eat with those sorts of people...* rather it is, *Lord why would you ever eat with me? Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof.... But speak the word only, and I shall be healed.*

It is in the recognition that *those sorts of people* are "us" that we begin to live as Christ calls us to live. And when our eyes are thus opened, we will eagerly greet our Ninevite cousins...those lost in darkness who do not know their left hand from their right. We will not wish fire to be rained down on them... rather we will long with earnest and sincere hearts for them to know the joy and consolation that we have known.

And when the **last** little waif is brought to the front of the line... we will not grind our teeth in a jealous fit...rather we will wipe away tears of joy... because the family of God... OUR family... has just gotten a little bigger.

+++Amen.