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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, September 20, 2020**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 25/Proper 20/Year A**

**First Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:11**

**Second Reading: Philippians 1:21-30**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 20:1-16**

**Sermon Title: “How much Does God Love Me?”**

## **Theme**

*Jesus tells a parable about God’s generosity, challenging the common assumption that God rewards people according to what they have earned or deserve.*

## **Text**

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>1</sup>“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ <sup>7</sup>They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

## Sermon

The Gospel Reading is an example of the “Radical Generosity of God,” which would have made a great sermon title, but no, I chose "How much Does God Love Me?"

You see I was being cute. For the first weekend of September the sermon was entitled, “How Much Do You Love Me? – Part 1” and I preached about the responsibility for behavior within the fellowship of faith and I pointed out that it is the responsibility of the one offended to point out an offense to the offender. That sermon title asked you, the fellowship of the faithful if you loved me or another member of the fellowship enough to come to me or them with an offense so that there is a chance to reconcile that relationship.

Then last weekend in a sermon entitled, “How Much Do You Love Me? – Part 2” I preached a sermon about the abundant grace of God when Peter asked the Lord Jesus how many times he must forgive someone who sins against him. Remember, Peter threw out a crazy number like seven, thinking, forgiving someone seven times is just crazy – surely there are limits. But Jesus replied that we must forgive not seven, but seventy-seven times! As far as the sermon title, “How Much Do You Love Me? – Part 2” goes, that is a lot of love!

Well, this week we are going to hear about the radical generosity of God, and now that I think about it, that would be a great sermon title, but alas, "How much Does God Love Me?" is what I said the sermon title would be back in the middle of August, so there it is. God gave it to me and we're stuck with it.

The Gospel Reading contains a story of God's radical generosity. And speaking for all of us, it's just not fair. We are hard-working Americans, and we just don't think it's fair that everyone – the one who works in the heat of the day all day, and the one who just stumbles onto the job site in the last hour – gets paid the same. Why, it's un-American. As a former manufacturing plant manager, this kind of thing is inviting trouble with the union.

So let's take a look at the First Reading. The Ninevites were the ancient enemy of the Hebrews. Jonah, as a prophet of the Hebrews sincerely hoped, maybe even prayed for the destruction of the Ninevites. But you see, God created all people,

those who are God-followers, and those who worship stone idols. And so God told Jonah to go to Ninevah and preach a word of repentance to the Ninevites. In fact, what God told Jonah to tell the Ninevites, was that they needed to repent or face annihilation. Jonah didn't want to deliver that message. He wanted God to wipe them out, so he headed the opposite direction, got swallowed by a whale, and spit up on the shore of Ninevah. He got the message and reluctantly went to Ninevah, walked to the center of town, and delivered the message that God wanted him to. "Repent or God is going to annihilate you!"

And you know what? Though his heart wasn't in it and he didn't even really try to get the message out, the King of Ninevah heard him and he and the whole nation repented! "Dang it!" thought Jonah. "Now God won't wipe those blankety-blank Ninevites out!" And so Jonah went out into the wilderness and pouted. The First Reading is his coming to terms with God being the God of all.

Jeez, now that I think about it, this reading is a lot like the Gospel Reading! A lesson about the differences between our human understanding of what is right and good and the radical generosity of God!

Lest you think these stories are just biblical platitudes from antiquity given to us to ponder but have no real-time relevance, let me remind you of some of the issues that were brought up by the Democratic candidates for the party nomination. And then there is the prevailing Republican response.

- Free college tuition for all and tuition forgiveness. Wait! What? That isn't fair! I paid for mine!
- Increase the minimum wage to a life-sustaining wage. What? That's crazy! It's supposed to be a "minimum" wage!
- Full health care for all! What? Who's gonna pay for that? More of my paycheck going to be taken by the government to pay for health care for those who haven't taken care of their own business.
- Open borders! Are you kidding me? Those free-loading no good Mexicans are going to come in and take our jobs and use up our social resources.

You and I will get to decide this November, and because we live in a democratic country, a majority vote will determine who the president will be, and who the

majority in the House and Senate will be, and together, that will determine the outcome to all those issues – or not. We will have to wait and see.

It is not this way all over the world, but in our country, there is a separation of church and state – a protection written into the Constitution as the First Amendment, that was written to protect religion from the state and not the other way around, as it is so often used. For better or worse, in this country, we have religious freedom, which also includes freedom *from* religion. Citizens of our country can worship the god of their belief as they please, or not worship any god at all. A religious belief system is a choice guaranteed under the Constitution.

Let's be clear, throughout Scripture, Jesus never spoke to the Roman authorities until his trial. Jesus always spoke to the Jews or people of other religions like the Samaritans, people who were powerless to enact any institutional change. But that does not mean he and his teachings had no impact. On the contrary, Jesus Christ and his teachings are felt everywhere.

One little example; the biggest health system in our area is Mercy Health, founded by the Catholic Church. In Fort Wayne, where I am from, the biggest hospitals are Lutheran Hospital and Methodist Hospital. Christians have always been at the forefront of bringing mercy and wholeness.

Another example, arguably, some of the best institutions of higher learning were formed by religious bodies: Harvard and Yale Universities were founded by the Congregationalists. Princeton was founded by the Presbyterians. Notre Dame was founded by the Catholics. The best known Lutheran university is probably Valparaiso but there are several.

And I am pretty sure that I am right about this, the Ten Commandments are the first written code of law and the basis for every code of law since.

But I digress, the point I am making is that Christians do not need to and should not rely on the government to do what we are called to do (i.e., to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God).

For example, we are facing two major disasters; the wildfires on the west coast and the repeated hurricanes and tropical storms in the south. FEMA will do what it will,

but the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and Lutheran Disaster Response will be there first and last and they do it all with the generous donations of Christians and others.

The same is said for the mercy shown to immigrants and refugees here and around the world.

Frankly, on those several issues, I mentioned a few minutes ago, I don't care what your political opinion on them is. We can disagree as fellow citizens of this great country, but what we as Christians cannot disagree about is the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In this week's readings, we have examples of that. Jonah did not get to decide whom God loved. God loved the Ninevites and wanted them to straighten up. I'm pretty sure that in our day, God loves radical Muslims that terrorize the world, and radical Christians who blow up abortion clinics. I believe that God hates how they abuse his word to justify their evil actions, but God still loves them.

And I believe that God wants to save all that God has created for eternity, and if that means one comes to faith on their death bed and another like me has been a Christian for a lifetime, then who am I to cry, "That's not fair!" I am not God.

And when in soberer moments I think about it, I like all, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I am as lost to saving myself as the homeless town drunk asleep on the park bench.

But thank God, God loves us all. And sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us from ourselves; some of us from our sinfulness and some of us from our self-righteousness. You decide which one you are.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

But know this, the answer to my question which is the title to my sermon, "*How Much Does God Love Me?*" was answered on the cross of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago when he stretched his arms out far and wide to embrace *the whole world* with his love. About this salvation that Jesus brought, the Apostle Paul wrote, *this is God's doing*.

And with that in mind, we ought to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, recognizing that any suffering we incur, we incur boasting in Christ Jesus, for the honor of serving those God loves, in Jesus' name.

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, forgive us when we try to move you and your Heavenly Father aside and take over. Thank you for this house of worship, and for your word, and for your love, grace, and mercy. After being closed for two weeks, we so need to gather and hear your words of Gospel and forgiveness, and gather around this altar and taste and see your love for us in this meal. Forgive us of our arrogance and receive us humbly. We pray this in your name. Amen