

Sermon
16 Pentecost-Proper 20-A-2
Saint Andrew's
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Jonah 3:10-4:11
Psalm 145:1-8
Philippians 1:21-30
Matthew 20:1-16

Growing up is hard work—especially once we become adults! I think of the hard work our ancestors had to do to wrap their minds around the fact that not only was the earth not the center of the universe, but it was a third rate planet orbiting a small star in a minor galaxy.

It's also quite hard to let go of the "We're number One" myths about our country. I was told in school that we are so especially favored by God that God had no problem with us destroying Native American culture, enslaving 4 million Africans, and damaging the natural world.

Of course, to maintain this "We're #1" worldview we have to ignore certain provable facts like: the US ranks 27th in the world in healthcare and education and 54th in infant mortality rate.

But the hardest thing of all to outgrow is what's beneath all this need to be number one: the fiction that my ME is the center, and needs to be the center of all things.

The parable of Jonah—a parable, not a historical account-- describes this reality beautifully.

You remember the set-up. Jonah is called by God to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh, the capital of the violent, superpower Assyria. Wanting no part of this, because he knows God is generous, Jonah boards a ship going in the opposite direction. Yet, a storm engulfs the ship and after drawing lots, it is clear the storm is caused by Jonah's disobedience. So, with Jonah's permission, they throw him overboard to calm the storm.

Then you remember the big fish swallows Jonah. In the belly of the fish **Jonah has three days to contemplate the fact that maybe his truest happiness is actually found in the will of God and his deepest unhappiness is the result of running from God.**

After Jonah is spit up on the shore, he reluctantly goes to Nineveh to hold a preaching rally, which is miraculously successful—greater than any Billy Graham ever had.

Jonah gets massively depressed and then angry at God because the little bush that is shading him from the blazing sun, wilts and dies.

So, Jonah throws a pity party while Nineveh turns to the Lord.

God says 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 and also many animals?"

God, and God's love, not Jonah is the center of all things.

We see a similar example in Jesus's parable of the generous employer. The owner decides to pay the promised denarius, the daily wage, not only to those who worked all day, but also to those who worked only the last hour of the day.

The all-day workers get exactly what they are promised. But what they don't get is the bonus given to the latecomers.

It isn't fair. It is not just, but apparently it is the way of the Kingdom, as the employer says, **'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 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?'**

Exactly—in our self-centeredness, we are fine if we receive an extra blessing, but we lose our minds if someone else gets one and we don't.

I remember having a discussion with a parishioner in North Carolina who was angry about the affirmative action programs of the 1980s that favored Blacks and other minorities in hiring and college admissions.

"It's not a level playing field. It's not fair", he said.

"But wait a minute" I said. "When I needed a summer job during college, Mr. Bonner next-door called his friend who was head of personnel at Rayloc Brake Shoe factory and who gave me a great factory job which I kept for 3 summers.

Then when I needed a job for a year after college, while I went through the diocesan pre-seminary process, the Episcopal chaplain at the University of Georgia called the husband of his secretary who got me a job on the midnight shift at Westinghouse Transformer Plant in Athens."

Many upper-middle class folks have been getting white people affirmative action for centuries."

"Doesn't matter" he says, "those people don't deserve any help."

When my ME is the center of all things it fractures the world into billions of pieces. As you know, our disordered desires are also ruining our planet. One recent article in the NYTimes said that if we keep going as we're going, there will be a mass migration from the southern United States to the North and the Northwest, to escape the heat. There will also be massive water shortages in many places and therefore more forest fires. And much of Boston will be underwater.

But then, in the reading from Philippians we see a spiritual grownup living another way. Paul is writing from the prison in Ephesus to the church in Philippi. And he says he'd love to slip out of his body and go be with Christ until the resurrection when he will enter the New Creation with a resurrection body. Paul's life is hard—in ancient prisons they didn't feed you, so you had to rely on the generosity of others—but **since God is the center of his life**, he says, **"my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith...."**

IN Buddhist terms, Paul is a Boddhisatva, that is, a person who has achieved the right to enter the bliss of Nirvana, but refuses to leave until everyone else is freed from their suffering.

This is the life Jesus is calling us to, but not just toward our children, but toward all people. But this life requires a death—the death of our attachment to my ME as the center of my universe. It's not a real death because my ME is just a mental construct with no real existence, but it certainly feels real, until we find the true center of our lives, the True Self, which is Christ in us.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?"

When Christ is in us, we are on the journey to Lose the ME and find the WE in which all creation will rejoice.

This new birth of course requires a major shift of consciousness. But we **can't shift ourselves, any more than a surgeon can operate on his**

own hands. Rather what we do is pray, in our hearts and in our church, for the daily grace to grow into the full stature of Christ, where we see ourselves and each other as God sees us—the One New Humanity in Christ, full of the generosity of God.