



"Is your anger a good thing?" Pledge to hold "malice toward none"

Sermon for Sunday, Sept. 20, 2020 (16th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 20A, Track 2)

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The book of Jonah is one of the shortest but also one of the most well-known books in the Bible. This brief tale of the reluctant prophet speaks to us so profoundly because it packs so much authentic humanity into such a short story.

Jonah tries to run from God's call, an impulse most of us can understand and empathize with. Despite Jonah's disobedience, though, God saves him from death at sea by sending a large fish to swallow him and spit him up on dry land.

Jonah finally follows through on what God asks him to do – to warn the city of Nineveh of their destruction if they do not change their ways – but then he gets mad when he actually succeeds and the people listen to him and repent and change their ways!

Why would Jonah NOT want the people to repent and be saved? Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire – one of the enemies of the kingdom of Israel. Jonah had every reason to want to see their destruction, which is why he tried with all his might to avoid delivering God's word of warning to them. Again, Jonah's impulses are all-too-human: he would rather see his enemies punished for their sins than for God to show mercy to them.

Jonah is so mad over seeing his enemies forgiven that he says he would rather die than live. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the scriptures, *The Message*, has Jonah conclude with this line, "So, God, if you won't kill them, kill me! I'm better off dead!"

But God asks Jonah, "Is your anger a good thing?"
Or, in other translations, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

God then makes a shrub grow over Jonah in the desert to give him shade, and destroys it the next day. When Jonah gets mad about that too, God asks him again, "Is your anger a good thing?"

"Yes," Jonah insists. "It is right for me to be angry – angry enough to die!"

"Well," God points out, "you're so upset over this bush dying, which you didn't create – you didn't plant it or cultivate it – so why would I not be upset over thousands of people and animals in Nineveh being destroyed – people and animals that I DID create?"

It's kind of like what the landowner in the parable in today's Gospel reading says to those who complain about everyone being paid the same wage for different amounts of work: "Don't I have the right to do what I want with what belongs to me?"

We human beings can talk a good game about God's equality and forgiveness and mercy, but we're usually only envisioning ourselves as the recipients of those gifts from God. When we start to see what it means for God to give to all people equally or to show mercy to everyone, sometimes we start to falter a bit on our espousal of those great ideals. We'd rather the people of Nineveh got the punishment that was coming to them, and we'd rather be paid more if we worked longer and harder than other people. But if WE'RE the ones under threat of punishment, we're happy if God forgives us – in fact, we even EXPECT him to. If WE'RE the ones who worked only an hour and are paid for a full day's work, suddenly we're not protesting the "injustice" of the situation anymore.

Both the story of Jonah and the parable from today's Gospel reading remind us of the Golden Rule that Jesus taught, in faithfulness to his Jewish tradition – that we should wish for others what we wish for ourselves. We should wish forgiveness and mercy for others just as much as we wish it for ourselves. We should be willing to advocate for justice and equality not just when it benefits us, but even when it means we might get less or be asked to give up some privilege we have.

Jonah and the workers who were hired first are angry because they don't get what they want, or what they think they deserve. They're mad because things don't turn out the way they thought they should turn out.

This angry pouting reminds me of how the losing side often reacts after an election in our country. As we approach another bitterly divisive Presidential election in November, it seems that there are many in our country who, like Jonah, would prefer to see the "other side" destroyed rather than see them repent and change their ways. The goal for both sides of the political divide doesn't seem to be coming to any kind of an agreement or finding a peaceful solution to our differences; the goal seems to be to simply to defeat and destroy the other side.

This division, negativity and anger disturbs me. It leaves me wondering how many of us will be pouting under our shrubs like Jonah after the election, angry that God has not destroyed our opponents.

Speaking to the House of Bishops last week, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry called the church to consider the "precedent" of Jesus's actions in the scriptures in the midst of this election season.

The precedent Jesus sets is to "love your neighbor as yourself," and when the disciples seek to clarify that teaching with a question about "who is my neighbor," Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan – a story about reaching across divides to help someone in need.

Bishop Curry reminded us yet again that "love is the way," that love is the fulfilling of the law, quoting from the reading from Romans 13 that we heard a few weeks ago in the Sunday lectionary. He reminded us that "partisan neutrality does not mean moral neutrality," and called us to conduct ourselves, both in how we vote and in how we engage with others in our civic discourse, in obedience to Jesus's call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In his speech, he referenced the work of Braver Angels, that nonpartisan "citizens' movement working to bring liberals and conservatives together to depolarize America" that I've referenced in previous sermons and which some of us were introduced to last month through participating in the Kaleidoscope Summer Institute.

In the leadup to the election, Braver Angels is hosting online debates every week between Americans from across the political spectrum on a variety of divisive issues, like,

"Has President Trump been good for Black America?"
"Should the federal government make mask wearing mandatory?"
"Is 'cancel culture' erasing free speech in America?"

Bishop Curry drew our attention to an initiative of Braver Angels called "With Malice Toward None." This initiative is designed to help bring the country together in a spirit of reconciliation, collaboration, and community-building after the election in November.

The initiative takes its name from a call to unity in Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address, given toward the end of the Civil War in 1865:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations," Lincoln said to a country full of people who were literally killing each other.

Braver Angels' "With Malice Toward None" initiative calls on people to take a pledge to hold "malice toward none" after the election, no matter what the outcome. The pledge is simple:

"Regardless of how the election turns out, I will not hold hate, disdain, or ridicule for those who voted differently from me. Whether I am pleased or upset about the outcome, I will seek to understand the concerns and aspirations of those who voted differently and look for opportunities to work with people with whom I disagree."

Braver Angels acknowledges that many of us will feel the strong reactive emotions of hate, disdain and ridicule for "the other side" immediately following the election. The key is not to hold on to or nurse these feelings of ill-will, but to allow them to flow through us and intentionally choose a different response. This is why the pledge says "I will not HOLD hate, disdain or ridicule," not "I will not FEEL hate, disdain, or ridicule."

Yesterday, I took the pledge. For me, taking this pledge means that even though I may feel hate, disdain, or ridicule for those who voted differently from me in the presidential election, I will not pout like Jonah under the shrub in the desert. I will choose to follow Jesus's precedent and love my neighbor as myself, remembering that my neighbor includes those most

different from me. I will love my neighbor by re-engaging and re-entering public civic conversation after the election with the goal of offering hope and healing to the country and working toward reconciliation with those with whom I disagree.

As emotions are flying high as the election approaches, you might feel yourself, like Jonah, hoping for the destruction of your enemies. I invite you to hear God's question to Jonah: "Is your anger a good thing?" and join me in following Jesus's command to love your neighbor as yourself by taking the pledge to hold "malice toward none" no matter what the outcome of the election.