

Pentecost 17A - Comments/questions on the lessons for September 20, 2026

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

- This is the part of Jonah that we often forget. Jonah goes to Ninevah after being in the fish for three days, and his words change the entire city. But Jonah is not happy! Why is Jonah so angry? What reason does Jonah give for not going to Ninevah in the first place? When have we been offended by God's all-inclusive love?
- Jonah is perhaps the biblical book most full of humor. When Ninevah repents, the king orders the cattle to wear sackcloth and ashes! When God refers to the animals at the end of the book, he is recalling these ridiculous lengths of repentance that the people of Ninevah take.
- We also see humor over Jonah's distress about the plant that shades him – a plant he cares more about than the 120,000 people of Ninevah! When have "little things" in the church or in our lives gotten in the way of the faith and love we are called to?
- The town of Ninevah is significant. It was the capital of Assyria – the nation that conquered and exiled the northern kingdom of Israel around 722 BC. Ninevah does not just represent an outsider; it represents the enemy. Who would be our "Ninevah" today? How does Jonah's story call us to act?

Psalms 145:1-8

- In this psalm of praise, we hear the psalmist declare, "One generation shall praise your works to another and shall declare your power." (v. 4) We need all generations within the Body of Christ. Each generation shares with the other generations what God is doing and how God is working. Thus, older generations "pass down" their wisdom to a younger generation. And younger generations "pass up" their enthusiasm for the faith. How can we encourage generations to speak and share with one another?
- We hear a familiar phrase: "The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (v. 8) This line is used seven times in the Old Testament, including last week's psalm (Psalm 103:8) and our first reading today (Jonah 4:2) (The other references are Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Psalm 86:15; and Joel 2:13.) The phrase "slow to anger" in Hebrew would literally translate as "long in the nose," perhaps referring to the heavy breathing we do when angry. This phrase is used three times in Proverbs (14:29; 15:18; 16:32), in which we are encouraged to be "slow to anger." It is a reminder to us not simply of who God is but also who God calls us to be, a people shaped in a slowness to anger and in an abundance of mercy and love.

Philippians 1:21-30

- "For to me, living is Christ, and dying is gain" (1:21). What does Paul mean by this? In one sense, this restates what Paul said in Romans 14 last week: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:7-8) But is there another way to consider the "gain" Paul speaks of? We are used to think of the "gain" being heaven, but are there other possibilities?
- To raise one other possibility for what Paul might mean by "gain" – a word only used three times in the New Testament and never in reference to heaven – he may be saying that his death could bring more gains to the Kingdom than his life. Compare similar words from Martin Luther King, Jr, the night before he died:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. **I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.** And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

- What does it mean to stand "firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind" (1:27)? Does this mean that we are supposed to agree? What makes us one?

- When Paul speaks of this unity of spirit, he says, “this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation.” What does that mean?

Matthew 20:1-16

- We usually understand this parable as speaking about how it is never too late to have faith in Christ. Yet, in Jesus’ own time, this parable would carry a different meaning – especially for the Pharisees. For them, the “latecomers” would refer to the Gentiles, the “late” inheritors of God’s promise. Like the Pharisees, we continue to like to draw distinctions about who or who should not receive God’s promises. However, God’s good news is open to all people. When have you/we drawn such distinctions? How can we help each other take those distinctions down?