

## **Stewardship Sermon**

**Susan Flanders**

**Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16**

Radical generosity, not based on merit, drives us nuts! Seeing people get something they don't deserve makes us crazy!

And that is exactly what we have in today's readings. There is God's ready forgiveness of all the people of Nineveh – a whole huge city known for its corruption and decadence. For some reason, in response to Jonah's reluctant warnings, they all repented at the last minute, and God totally forgave them, making Jonah furious. It's as if long-term incompetent national leaders, or, let's say, financial institutions, apologized and sincerely repented for the economic chaos that had ensued on their watch and were immediately forgiven, let off the hook, bailed out, or some were and some weren't. Wouldn't that make some of us furious? Or would we be lavish in our forgiveness?

And what about the people in the Gospel reading who only worked one hour and were paid the same as those who sweated it out all day? Wouldn't we be furious at that landlord; wouldn't we be outraged at the unfairness of it all? Would the landlord question us: "Are you envious because I am generous?" How would that landlord treat 12 million illegal immigrants? Would he grant them amnesty and a path to citizenship despite all those who have come here legally and played by the rules? And, if he did, wouldn't many of us be furious – wouldn't that be grossly unfair?

Radical generosity, not based on merit, drives us nuts! So what might be God's word for us here in these readings that can remind us all too acutely of complicated issues in today's world? These readings shake up our natural reactions and assumptions about what is fair, in both our private and our public life.

In both, we depend on accountability – rewards and punishments given as deserved, not at random. For me, forgiveness shouldn't be given too quickly – I'd prefer to hold out for lasting evidence of repentance and change – I might be like Jonah, sitting under the bush, sulking, because God was so quick to forgive the wicked Ninevites. And what about compensation way out of proportion to the value of labor – think golden parachutes for CEO's of failed companies compared with school teachers? This kind of inequity galls me! On what standards should compensation be based so as to be fair?

I think our problems with Bible passages like these stem from a basic confusion, a comparison of apples with oranges. The apples of our human need for standards of behavior and the oranges of an unfathomable force of love that undergirds all of

existence and is not bound by our narrow, bean-counter theologies. God is neither a glorified CPA nor a score-keeper, yet we often think of God that way. God is utterly free, and our experiences of God's mercy and unconditional love are surprising, hard to understand, sometimes hard to receive. We so often cling to judgment, to that voice in us that says we have to deserve whatever love and other good things that come our way. And connected with this is our reluctance to give gladly and freely, fearing we'll run short, fearing we'll reward someone unjustly.

Let's imagine our world of the apples of accountability as surrounded by the oranges of totally amazing grace. We need to live in both worlds. The apples world – the one of clear standards based on merit – comes pretty naturally and is pretty much up to us. The world of the oranges of unfathomable grace might be thought of as God's domain, but it works mostly in and through us if we are willing and open to it.

And let's imagine St. John's Church as a place where we inhabit both these worlds, especially when it comes to how we talk about and use our money. As we begin our annual pledge campaign, our Finance Committee and Stewardship Committees, with the vestry's full support, are being very clear about what it will cost to run St. John's in 2009. They calculate that we will need to increase our pledging on average in excess of 10% if we are to maintain our ministry at its current level. You can find out all about this in detail in the stewardship packets that will come in the mail shortly. This is all part of the smooth running of any parish – the apples of accountability, of prudence and planning and good process. It is good that we can speak openly and plainly about the financial facts of life at St. John's.

Preaching the gospel about money at St. John's is another enterprise entirely, oranges to apples. It goes far beyond stewardship packets and budgets and debt service and when we paint the building. What today's gospel and Jesus' whole life offer us is profligate, loving, open-handed generosity. Jesus offers us what God offers – profligate, loving, open-handed generosity. Jesus offers us what God would have us be – profligate in loving, open-handed in generosity. There is no better time than now for us to put these apples and oranges together.

Please think about this as you make decisions about giving money away in the coming year. Along with informing yourself about what St. John's needs are, I know we'll all be examining our own finances in the light of the bigger economic picture. And I know, with the transition, beginning with my retirement and stretching through an interim until a new rector arrives sometime in 2010, some of you are uncertain. Some of you may be anxious about our future, and what Steve Hayward will be like, and whether St. John's will still be a comfortable parish home for you. You may be tempted to hold back on your pledge, or hold even, to play a waiting game and see whether things shape

up to your liking – people do do this in interims. But this should not happen here! This parish is healthy and growing and alive and full of enthusiasm and young families. We are so well poised to attract excellent new leadership! Now, more than ever, is the time to be generous, to be trusting and hopeful for our future, and to increase your pledges for another year. In doing this, you are claiming the success of our mission here – your success, not mine. By supporting St. John’s adequately through this time, you sustain your church, your ministry, your future.

Please, please – alongside all the ways that the apples of accountability influence your thinking about how you spend your money, please also embrace the oranges of radical generosity and grace in this year ahead – for it is indeed God’s own generosity and grace which blesses us all. May we return it joyfully to the world we’ve been given. Amen.