

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

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A Sermon by

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on

Jonah 3:10–4:11; Matthew 20:1–16

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The Evil Eye

You can understand why they grumbled.

They'd been there all day. They had borne most of the work and the heat of the sun. And now, at the end of the day, the people who arrived late, some at the eleventh hour, when the work was nearly over, received exactly the same wage.

There is nothing especially mysterious about their reaction. In fact, it seems almost reasonable. Something like an instinct. We place our labor on one side of the scale, and our reward on the other. We compare what we have given with what another person has given. We weigh our burden against another's, and if the scales do not sit level, something in us rises up and says:

This cannot be fair.

The difficulty begins when we notice that this is not simply a story about worker jealous wages.

It's not just any vineyard, not just any landowner, and, finally, not just any day's wage.

When Jesus tells a parable, the familiar world is always there, but those with ears to hear are being invited to look through it. The vineyard becomes more than a vineyard. The wage becomes more than a wage. And the parable moves you beyond asking "What would be fair?" into asking "What sort of world is God creating here?" and maybe even asking "Is this the world for me?"

To approach that question, I might invent a parable or two of my own. There once was a team who won a great victory and the players who played in the first half of the final game complained that those teammates who only went on the field in the third quarter were allowed, like them, to wear that championship ring.

Or imagine the people who came to church on time complaining that the ones who arrived an hour late still received exactly the same amount of Communion,

and they didn't even have to sit through the sermon.

You can see how quickly this can become personal!

I'm trying to point out that comparison is not only the thief of joy but a way of turning generosity into grievance.

And Jesus returns to this danger regularly. The elder son in his parable of the prodigal is not angry because he has been deprived of anything. He is angry because his fallen brother has been welcomed back by his father, with a celebration, no less. And that family feast becomes unbearable to him because someone who squandered everything is the occasion for it.

The laborers in the vineyard fall into the same trap

The ones who have worked all day have received exactly what they were promised. Nothing has been taken from them. Their grievance begins only when they look sideways.

This is one of the great spiritual perils: that we can receive the goodness of God and still find ourselves unable to enjoy it because we are too occupied with the question of whether somebody else has received more than they deserve.

And in Jonah, this same grievance becomes something darker. Because Jonah, too, receives exactly what he ought to have wanted.

He was sent, reluctantly, and by a rather circuitous route, to Nineveh, the great city of a rival empire. He announces judgment. And, astonishingly, the city listens. The people repent. The king repents. The whole place turns toward God, including the cattle! Jonah became the divine instrument through which an entire people received mercy.

It's hard to imagine a prophet enjoying greater success than this!

And Jonah hated it.

The book says, with extraordinary bluntness, that what God had done seemed to Jonah a great evil. To Jonah, God's mercy was a calamity.

This is the sobering possibility Holy Scripture sets before the faithful. Not that we should fail. But that we should succeed magnificently in the service of God and not have eyes to see it.

Nineveh repents and Jonah cannot rejoice in it. He stands in the middle of heaven bursting into his world and can only experience it as hell.

Those all-day labourers in the vineyard begin to look very much like Jonah. The landowner asks the grumblers: "Is your eye evil because I am good?" The problem is not that the landowner has done evil. The problem is that his goodness has become evil in their sight,, in their eyes.

Nothing was taken from them. They received what was promised. But another person received mercy, another person received generosity that they did not earn in quite the same way.

This is enough to make goodness itself look offensive.

This is the "evil eye."

A phrase with a history. In the Hebrew Scriptures, an "evil eye" is not primarily something superstitious. It is an idiom for the eye that begrudges another person what is given to them. In Deuteronomy, Israel is warned about precisely this. The seventh year, the year of release, is approaching, when debts are to be remitted. And Moses warns the prosperous Israelite not to calculate too carefully. Do not say to yourself

that there is little point in lending to your poor brother because the year of release is near. Do not let “your eye be evil against your poor brother,” so that you give him nothing.

So this “evil eye” is the eye that sees another person’s need and immediately begins calculating what generosity might cost you.

The Book of Proverbs gives us the opposite expression, speaking of the person who is “good of eye,” the generous person who gives bread to the poor. The good eye sees another person’s need and opens the hand. The evil eye sees the same need and begins keeping accounts.

So when the landowner in the parable asks, “Is your eye evil because I am good?” The question has a deep scriptural resonance.

It is as though he were saying: Has my generosity become unbearable to you simply because it has been given to someone else?

And Jesus speaks elsewhere about the evil eye as something that comes from within us, from the human heart. It is not simply that we look upon evil things. It is that something within us can make what is good appear evil.

And that is why the evil eye is so spiritually destructive. Because it does not merely spoil our opinion of other people. It can rob any good and heavenly thing from us, hollowing it out from the inside.

Jonah sits outside Nineveh while an entire city has been spared, and he cannot see the miracle coursing through his very life.

The elder brother stands outside a house filled with music and dancing because the dead has come to life and the lost has been found, and he cannot bring himself to go inside.

The laborers end their day in a vineyard where the master has been extravagantly generous, and they can only feel bitterness.

Nothing has been taken from any of them. And yet they have lost everything.

Because once the eye becomes fixed upon what somebody else has received,

We can see the lost restored, the sinner welcomed, the latecomer rewarded, and instead of recognizing the kingdom of heaven breaking into the world, we stand on the margins, keeping score.

This parable is a warning.

Jesus wants us to see that the kingdom of heaven is not governed by scarcity.

The goodness of God shown to another person does not subtract anything from the goodness of God shown to us.

But the evil eye persuades us otherwise, that another person’s blessing is somehow our loss.

Once we believe that, even the merciful actions of God can become a calamity for us.

And that may be one of the nearest things to hell that Scripture allows us to imagine: not the absence of God's mercy, but the presence of mercy everywhere, shining clear as the day, a heart that has become unable to rejoice in it, an eye that can only see evil.

The old philosophical question is whether God can be good in a world so marked by evil.

But there is another question, quieter and more searching:

Can we bear to see God being good?

Mercy is easy enough to praise from a distance.

It becomes harder when it falls upon someone we would rather see judged.

Can we watch another person forgiven without measuring the cost?

Can we see another welcomed without asking whether they have earned the right to stand beside us?

Can we rejoice in a grace that refuses to consult our sense of proportion?

Because if we cannot, let us not suggest that God has failed to be good, but find the courage to ask whether goodness itself has become painful for us to behold.

That is the evil eye.

It looks upon mercy and grace and sees unfairness.

It sees another person blessed and imagines itself robbed.

So when we pray, "Lord, have mercy," we should pray also for a heart and an eye able to bear the sight of his mercy.

Eyes that can recognize grace when it comes near.

Hearts that can receive it without fear.

And souls that can rejoice when it is poured out upon another.

For heaven is nearer than we think, whether or not we have learned to see it.

Which means that repentance may be, in part, the recovery of sight: the turning of the heart until mercy no longer looks like loss, and the goodness of God no longer appears as a threat.

And this is why one of the first words we hear from Jesus is simply this:

"Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." So very near. Look. Listen.

"The kingdom of heaven is at hand."
