

Worship on the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

10:00 am September 20, 2026

Minister: The Rev. Brad Childs Music Director: Binu Kapadia

Vocalist: Fionna McCrostie Elder: Andrea Gartrell

Children's time presenter: Brad Reader: Gina Kottke

We gather to worship God

Music prelude

Greeting

L: The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you

P: And also with you

Lighting of the Christ candle

Welcome and announcements

Preparation for worship

Call to worship:

L: God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way. And God changed his mind about the disaster he had planned.

P: But Jonah was very displeased and became angry!

L: The Lord asks us: "Is it right for you to be angry?"

P: We are quick to withhold grace, yet desperate to receive it.

L: Should not God be concerned for the vastness of creation and show mercy to all people?

P: Come, let us worship the God of unbounded compassion. Let us praise the Lord whose love surpasses our judgment

Opening praise: *Great are you, Lord*

Prayers of approach and confession

God of all creation,

You open the world around us and fill it with creatures of Your love and purpose.

Mountains declare Your majesty.

Ripened fields speak of Your generosity.

Oceans show Your power and the skies Your grandeur.

Birds sing of Your freedom; even the ant works with Your persistence.

We pray that our work would honour Your justice and mercy,

and that our relationships would speak of Your love and compassion.

So may we praise You, not just in this hour of worship,

but in all our waking and working.

May we live Your praise and promise

through Christ, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit,

now and always.

In the confidence of Your grace, we confess:

God, You are the giver of every good gift,

yet our generosity is often limited.

We complain about our circumstances.

We compare ourselves to others and notice what they have that we don't.
We share some of what we have... but we still worry about running short.
Forgive us our jealousy and greed.
Give us generous hearts that trust You day by day.
Forgive these errors as we trust in your unending mercy. Amen.

Response: *I will trust in the Lord*

Assurance of God's pardon

Your sins are as far from you as east is from west. When the Father looks at you, He sees the Son. Know that you are forgiven in Christ and that you too must offer forgiveness. Amen.

Music offering: Dayspring Singers

We listen for the voice of God

Song: Jesus loves me

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Children's Time

Hey everybody!

Raise your hand if you've ever been the first one picked for a game... or the last one still waiting. Or have you ever had to take turns sharing a toy and the other person got to play with it a lot longer than you? Or if you've ever thought, "Hey, that's not fair! I worked longer / harder / got here earlier! / They cut in line"?

Jesus told a story that hits that exact feeling.

A landowner needs workers for his vineyard. He hires some people first thing in the morning and promises them a full day's pay. Then he goes out again at nine, at noon, at three... and even at five o'clock, when the day's almost over, and he finds more and more workers to help finish the day's work in the fields. And to all of them he says the same thing. So he tells the ones hired in the morning they'll get a full day's pay, but he also promised a full day's pay to the people who came later.

When it's time to get paid, the owner starts with the last ones hired. Each gets a full day's wage. The early crew watches and thinks, "Sweet—we're gonna get extra!" But they get the same amount everyone was promised.

Cue the grumbling: "We worked all day in the heat, and these guys only put in one hour? You're treating them the same as us?!"

The owner smiles and says, "Friends, I kept my promise to you. I just decided to be extra generous to the others. Are you jealous because I'm kind?"

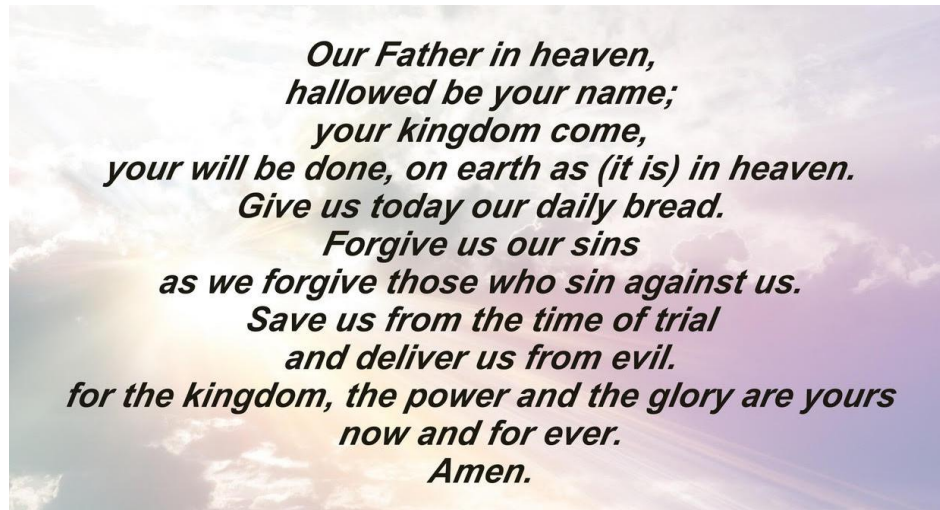
In God's kingdom, the love and welcome never run out. Whether you showed up at the first whistle or walked in for the last activity, God still gives the same full, amazing welcome. No one gets short-changed. No one is left out. Anyone who turns to God at any point in life gets the same reward: a life changed and bettered by knowing God and by being able to know Him forever. :

Because God is not just "fair"; God is generous with everyone. And that's better than fair. Try to be the same in your lives.

Prayer... Lord we grumble and complain and compare our lives to others. But we know that comparison is the thief of joy. You give freely to all. Help us to do the same. And now we pray the prayer Christ taught his first disciples to pray, saying... Our Father in Heaven,

The Lord's Prayer

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Song: *I've got peace like a river*

Scripture readings: & **Matthew 20:1-16**

Response: *Glory to the Father*

Message: Grace Under Fire

Do we get angry when God loves others as much as God loves us? I think we do. Most of us first met Jonah in a children's storybook: a stubborn prophet runs from God, gets swallowed by a whale, says a quick prayer, gets spit out on the beach, and then everything turns out fine. The book ends, in that version, with a moral about obedience and a smiling cartoon whale. The actual book of Jonah is far stranger, darker, and more honest. It is a tightly crafted story of only four short chapters that refuses to let us off the hook. Jonah is not a cartoon character who learns his lesson; he is a real prophet who experiences God's mercy firsthand and then bitterly resents it when the same mercy is extended to people he despises. The book is less about a fish and more about the scandal of a God who refuses to hate the people we have decided are beyond forgiveness.

In the story so far, before today's reading, we have followed this reluctant prophet through a storm, into the belly of a great fish, and finally into the streets of Nineveh. And I know it doesn't really matter. Still, the bible never calls the creature that swallows Jonah a "whale"; it is a great fish from the depths of Hell, connected to Sheol (the place of the dead), that grabs him and drags him down into the deep. As a fun side note, the "great fish" in the story oddly changes genders after Jonah is swallowed, from a male (dag) to a female fish (dagah), as if it is "pregnant" with him and reverts to male (dag) once again as Jonah is vomited up. Do with that what you will, but understand the story almost certainly wasn't intended to be read completely literally by its first audience. Still, it's a situation in which a person is placed in a kind of radical confinement until they "turn" and an attitude change becomes possible.

In the story, Jonah is not punished so much as placed in an enclosure and left to await a result... a result that improves only when he uses a prayer from the book of Psalms to change his perspective and begins listening to God once more. Basically, the things God asks us to do, and we don't do, put us in a place where life cannot move forward, and we become trapped in a place where we cannot live our own lives (sort of like an unborn child waiting to be born).

In the end, Jonah is saved. Although he ran from what God wanted, he eventually decided to do what he heard God asking him to do. He goes to his enemies and asks them to stop doing evil things. When he arrives in Nineveh (Babylon; the land of the people who enslaved his people), Jonah preaches the shortest sermon in the Bible. "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown," and that is it. And then the unthinkable happens. The entire city agrees that things in their country are messed up and need fixing. From the king on his throne to the cattle in the fields, they put on sackcloth (a black veil for mourning the dead), they fast, they cry out to God. And then we read these words:

"When God saw what Nineveh did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."

And hey, you'd think that would be the happy ending.

The prophet's mission succeeds.

Jonah was supposed to tell them to turn away from evil; he eventually tells them, and they turn from evil and all their lives are spared. God shows mercy. It's a happy ending.

But chapter 4 opens with a shock:

"But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry."

Not disappointed. Not confused. Angry. The Hebrew is stronger yet. It says that to Jonah this was *evil*, or perhaps more accurately "a great evil". And then Jonah prays the most honest, most uncomfortable prayer in the book:

"Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to stop by fleeing to Tarshish, in the opposite direction. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity (I knew if I told them to turn to good, they would listen... and I did not want that. I wanted them to suffer). Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Jonah doesn't want to be forgiving. He wants HIS enemies dead. And he would rather die himself than watch God spare the descendants of those evil people over in Iran who destroyed his homeland (not them, by the way; their ancestors)!

Why? Why this rage? Why this death wish?

Jonah isn't a cartoon character of bitterness. He's a real Israelite prophet living in the early to mid-eighth century BC, during the reign of Jeroboam II. Outside of this book, we meet him only once, in 2 Kings 14:25, where he prophesies the expansion of Israel's borders. That was a time of national strength and deep anxiety. Because just over the

horizon sat Assyria, a new people planning to enslave his people (and they would later do that), so Jonah isn't crazy – he's correct to be worried.

Assyria was not merely another kingdom. It was the superpower of terror. Archaeological records from the century before Jonah- inscriptions of (Ash-Er-Nas-Er-Ple 2) Ashurnasirpal II and the bronze Balawat Gates of Shalmaneser III show us exactly what Jonah and every Israelite knew.

Conquered soldiers had their hands and feet cut off while still alive. They piled heads into pyramids outside the city walls. Captives were impaled and left to die slowly. They flayed enemies' skins and stretched them across walls. One king boasted that his horses waded through blood "like a river." Another made defeated nobles wear necklaces made of the severed heads of their own family members.

It was pure evil.

Nineveh itself would later become the empire's capital under Sennacherib. The palace reliefs unearthed there still show the siege of Judahite captives (Jews) having their skin shaved off in public view for entertainment. This was the reputation that hung over every Israelite household. Assyria had already extracted tribute from earlier kings. Prophets like Hosea and Amos warned that the day was coming when Assyria would swallow the northern kingdom whole. And within a generation of Jonah's mission, that is exactly what happened. In 722 BC, the northern tribes were deported, scattered, and lost forever.

So when God says, "Go to Nineveh," Jonah hears, "Go give a second chance to the people who will one day destroy everything you love." And Jonah doesn't do what God asks him to do. Instead, Jonah flees... not because he is afraid of the journey or the fish. He flees because he knows the character of God. He quotes Exodus 34 almost word for word. His God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love. Jonah *knows* that if the Ninevites repent, God will forgive them. And Jonah does not want that. He Hates That! He wants justice. He wants the fire to fall. He wants the empire that skins people alive to be wiped off the map.

When mercy comes anyway, picture yourself sitting where Jonah sat. East of the city, on a bare rise of ground under a scorching Mesopotamian sun. The air is thick with the dust of the plain and the faint, sour smell of the Tigris. Behind you, the great walls of Nineveh still stand. They are massive, dark, and unbroken. They are a proud nation.

You can hear the distant lowing of cattle that were supposed to die, the ordinary chatter of a city that was supposed to burn. No smoke. No screams. Just the ordinary hum of life continuing. And it makes Jonah's stomach turn. And it is supposed to make our stomachs turn too. The story is supposed to be shocking to the reader and hard to swallow. Like him, we are supposed to find this disgusting. They should all be dead. 120,000 people, their animals and everything they own, should be wiped from the earth!

Jonah sits outside the city under a makeshift shelter, waiting, hoping God will change His mind and still destroy them. God grows a plant to shade Jonah and care for him while he pouts. For a few hours the broad leaves block the glare, and the sudden coolness feels like kindness.

He won't get heat stroke. He won't get sick. He is cared for. The plant is saving him. BUT Jonah is "very happy". So then God sends a worm to eat the plant. The plant withers overnight. The next morning the sun rises hard and white; the east wind cuts across the plain, dry and relentless, raising grit that stings the eyes and coats the tongue. Jonah says again, "It would be better for me to die than to live." He says, God, I want to die; why was I even born! He is so mad that God would take away the plant God gave him in the first place.

And the Lord asks the question that still echoes: "But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

"It is," Jonah said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

Then comes the final word of the book... God's last word, left hanging in the air. I like the Contemporary English Version's translation here because it gets to the heart of things quickly. In it, God says, "Why does this plant bother you so much? You did not plant it or take care of it. It came up overnight to save you. It did its job and then the next night it died. In Nineveh, more than 120,000 people were lost and confused, and innocent animals too. But you are concerned about your shade tree dying. Don't you think I should be concerned about the city and its inhabitants just as much as your shade from the sun?

And then... that's it.

That's where it ends. No neat resolution. No "and Jonah finally got it." Just the question. Should I care less about hundreds of thousands of people than your feelings?

Jonah has experienced God's mercy in the belly of the fish. He has been rescued, forgiven, given a second chance. And yet when that same mercy is offered to people he considers beyond the pale; people whose brutality he has every historical and personal reason to hate... he cannot bear it. He's mad that a plant died but he would be happy to see an entire city burned to the ground and its people killed.

No matter how much mercy we receive, we don't like it when other people receive the same thing. We hate it. What does that say about us???

We know that feeling, don't we? There are people we would rather God not forgive. Systems, nations, groups, even individuals have wrongs so deep that mercy feels like a betrayal of justice. Sometimes the thing we care about more than the people is our own sense of fairness, our own security, our own group identity, our own happiness. We make our happiness the pinnacle of life and hold it way above our duty, our promises, our everything. We are selfish people, and we have every right to be happy and get our way, no matter what terrible things take place for that to happen or who else dies in the process. We are Jonah.

Jonah wants to die rather than live in a world where God is that gracious. And God keeps asking the same gentle, relentless question: Do you have a right to be angry? Should I not care about them too?

The book of Jonah ends without an answer from the prophet. It ends with the question pointed at listeners and readers because the God who relented over Nineveh is the

same God who, centuries later, hung on a cross outside another city and prayed for the people who put Him there. The same God who keeps offering second chances... to Assyrians, to Israelites, to us.

Where is your Nineveh? Who is the person, the group, the memory that still makes your stomach tighten when you hear the word “mercy”?

God invites us to live in the heart of mercy and care for the people we would rather see judged, letting our anger be swallowed by the same compassion that once rescued us.

It is not easy. Jonah never says it is easy. But it is the way of the God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love. And that God is still asking the question. If I can find mercy with you, why can I not find mercy for them? And truth be told. That is a question we all hate to hear asked. But we have to ask it. We have to.

Because when we can't accept the kind of forgiveness God is asking us to have, we get stuck in our lives, trapped in a life we can't break free of, stuck in a great fish, like a tomb with no way forward.

Amen.

Song: *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus in the morning* vrs 1-5 378

We respond to serve God

Our time of giving



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Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

God of mystery and wonder,
We look around at the beauty of the world.
and sense that You have given each precious thing its place

and a way of sustaining itself.
Thank You for Your attention to the details of creation.
Yet we also see an aching world.
and sense that many precious things are under threat.
Bless the work of faithful people everywhere who care for the climate and environment.
Show us how we can protect what is at risk.
for the health of Your whole creation.
God our Maker,
make us a sharing people.
God of energy and life,
We look around at the peoples of this world.
and see Your imagination and dignity in every variety of face and culture.
Thank You for the gifts You plant at the heart of humanity.
Yet we also see the aching of the hungry and hurting,
and hear the groans of parents whose children die in their arms
and the cries of children who fear tomorrow.
Bless the ministries of Your church across this country and around the world.
that bring healing and hope to lives at risk.
God our Maker,
make us a sharing people.
God of promise and possibility,
We look around at the places where people collide.
and hear the grumbling of nations locked into old rivalries and new grievances.
We watch leaders more impressed by polls than by effective policies.
We worry about the future of our communities and our children.
Thank You for the ministries of advocacy Your church undertakes
and the witness for justice and peace we make together in Jesus' name.
God our Maker,
make us a sharing people.
God of faithfulness and surprise,
We look at ourselves.
and sometimes doubt we can make a difference or have an impact.
Challenge us to recognize the kinds of power we *do* have:
the love and compassion,
the courage and commitment,
the laughter and friendship,
the generosity and mercy.
In all of these gifts we know Your power is at work within us and among us.
Call us to keep serving together,
trusting You can do more than we can ask or imagine
through Your church, our congregation, and our own lives,
blessed by the grace of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Sending out with God's blessing

Go, remembering God's generosity to us in Christ and in creation. Be generous in kindness to all who reach out to you.

May the power of the Spirit strengthen you, and the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge fill you with the fullness of God this day and evermore.

Response: Benediction (as you go)

Music postlude

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