

Jonah 3:10-4:11 ~ Matthew 20:1-16

It's not Fair! God's Upsetting Love

16th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction to First Lesson: Jonah 3:10-4:11

Nineveh. That great city is so like cities of our time. The mention of Nineveh calls to mind any place that is great, ungovernable, inhumane—and far from God. When this story about Jonah was composed (after 538 BCE and the return of Israel from Exile), Nineveh happened to be the loathsome capital of the Assyrian Empire. It was teeming with foreign people who were the *least* deserving of God's grace, in Jonah's mind.

The city of Nineveh and others like it stand under judgment. It would be easy to write them off, to be unconcerned about them, to let them go their own way while we carve out little corners where we can pursue our own island of spiritual safety. Before we do so, however, Nineveh deserves a second look.

The metropolis was doomed, and Jonah was to be the voice of its doom. Jonah did everything he could to evade the call of God to pronounce judgment, but in the end he did preach to the Ninevites of their impending demise, crying out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (3:4) Then, to his almost horrified surprise, 'the people of Nineveh believed God' (3:5). They proclaimed a fast that extended to all their animals as well.

Then 'God changed his mind' and spared Nineveh. This change is... astonishing. Jonah could not fathom this undeserved forgiveness. Furthermore, having prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed, God's change of mind ruined his reputation as a prophet. Our first scripture lesson picks up the story right at this point.

Intro to Second Lesson: Matthew 20:1-16

"Hey Jesus," says Peter. "How about us? What do we deserve? *We* are the ones who have left everything and followed you. And I mean everything. We are nothing like that self-righteous money-grabbing young man you just blew away by telling him he had to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor before *he* could hope to be on board. Not only did we leave everything, we have also been with you from day one. Remember back when you were getting started? Back by the Sea of Galilee? You called and we came and we are still with you as we head to Jerusalem. We are right on track. So, what will we get? What can we expect? After all, what would be only *fair* for us, being your first-string disciples and all?"

That was my paraphrase of what led to the parable, according to Matthew, that Jesus told in reply to Peter's question

Sermon:

Did you hear what he just said? Those slackers who only worked one hour got paid the same as those good, upright, hardworking folk who had been at it all day. What kind of justice is that? It's outrageous. And it's not fair. The last don't *deserve* to be first! We don't like that. Not at all. Unless we are among the last in line. Or not even in the line: someone who has been left out, frozen out, timed out, on the fringe, written off, or even erased.

But this story we just heard: that Jesus told, this parable which Matthew wrote down about fifty years later, our gospel lesson for today: this was and is a teaching intended for insiders, for Jesus' inner circle of disciples, for the early Jewish-Christian community who were Matthew's audience, and for us: church people, the faithful believers of FPC. This story was intended for those who go to work early in the morning and do their best to be at the front of any line or situation: yes, this is a story for those who are found, the sheep already in the fold.

So, let's be honest, for us-- isn't this story annoying, if not offensive? It's not fair! Why shouldn't the laborers who put in a long, hard, backbreaking twelve-hour day, get more than some slacker who worked for only one hour? That's just how the world works, people... This may be true; however, Jesus is teaching us that the kingdom of heaven is *not* like that. As Jesus' disciples were edging closer and closer to Jerusalem and his final days on earth were nearing completion, everybody was getting amped up.

Here was a lesson not yet learned: God is not like us. The kingdom of heaven does not work according to our rules where the first are first and the last are last, and too bad for those losers at the end of the line. Jesus says, "No. That is not it. That is not how God works or how the kingdom of heaven lines up. There is no first-class ticket on the train to glory. Nor is there extra credit for getting there early. Jesus warns us again and again, when judgment day arrives, it's going to be a surprise party—for all of us. God's system of reward and punishment is nothing like ours.

The driving question in both Jesus' parable of the generous landowner, and in the exchange between Jonah and God in our first lesson, is not "what is fair," according to our skewed view but "what is right" in God's eyes. What is right and righteous in the kingdom of heaven. Whether we like it or not. Jonah didn't like what was right in God's eyes for the people of Nineveh. It messed with his whole jam. He got angry and he pouted. In our vineyard parable, the early hires were disgruntled and resentful when they didn't get the extra pay they expected, after seeing the late hires get the same amount. They grumbled, grumbled. Even though they had been paid as promised, "whatever is right." Even though one day's pay in Jesus' time was barely enough to maintain a family at subsistence level. Those who worked all day were more concerned with getting what they thought they deserved-- than with the need to feed the families of those hired at the end of the day. In this story, we can see that What is right in God's eyes and what seems fair to us, are two very different questions.

Remember the elder son in the parable of the Prodigal son? He was spitting mad when he came in from a hard day of work in the field, only to discover that his dad had started a party for his slacker younger brother. He shouted at his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you filled the fatted calf for him!” (Luke 15:29-30). To which many of us are nodding in agreement, saying, “It’s not fair!”

It doesn’t seem fair in our skewed view. But it is right, according to Jesus law of Divine Love and mercy: the insiders, the first in line are treated with love and compassion. But at the same time, God is like a relentless search and rescue operation, working day and night, searching for those who have no work. God is relentless, dauntless, stopping at nothing—not even death by torture on the cross, that the lost would be found. Even while hanging on the cross, Jesus welcomed the thief who hanging beside him, into the kingdom. Talk about last minute.

Today’s parable challenges and offends the found. It calls us to not to count up our good deeds—but instead to wear a Geiger counter that registers every time we start to point a finger, or seethe with resentment, or grumble against another’s failings. These are warning signs that we are veering off God’s question of: “what’s right” and into our presumptive narrowing tunnel of “what’s fair.” These are exactly the times when being a Christ follower must make a difference. These are the times when we must ask ourselves, “What is right?” What would Jesus have us do? These are the times when we need to remember about Jonah, the first hired, and the elder son: and pray that we do better.

Jesus taught us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” because God cares about and provides for our daily bodily needs, which are *not* guaranteed. Enough food to eat is a gift some of us are born into, and therefore too easily presume to be a given. Honestly, I have never had a day in my life where I was hungry and had no way to find food. This is not because of anything I did to deserve such a privileged life—it’s only because of the family, place, and time into which I was born. Many, many more souls on this earth are born into a life of food insecurity. Food is not a given on this earth. Daily wage for daily bread is central to our daily lives. Enough bread for all, is the prayer that spurs those of us who are well-fed into action on behalf of those who are not. Jesus is teaching us to care about, to engage in the holy work of feeding all God’s children.

I’m guessing that Jesus did *not* teach us to also pray, “Give us this day our daily portion of grace” because although God’s grace may be radical, upsetting, and even offensive: it is unending and always on tap. That’s what seems to anger Jonah. And that’s what upset the laborers who worked from sun up to sun down, and got the same pay as the those who worked one hour. And what ticked off the elder brother in Jesus’ parable we know as “The Prodigal Son.” Grace has nothing to do with merit. And therefore, it lives on a different plane than the fair/not fair linear land we occupy most of the time. Grace is non-linear and multi-dimensional.

We have our rules. Our sense of what's fair. And then grace comes along and shakes things up. It happened one day during the Second World War, when a group of soldiers was fighting in the rural countryside of France. As Michael Yaconelli tells this story in his book subtitled, "God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People":

During an intense battle, one of the American soldiers was killed. His comrades did not want to leave his body on the battlefield and decided to give him a Christian burial. They remembered a church a few miles behind the front lines whose grounds included a small cemetery surrounded by a white fence. After receiving permission to take their friend's body to the cemetery, they set out for the church, arriving just before sunset.

A priest, his bent-over back and frail body betraying his many years, responded to their knocking... "Our friend was killed in battle," they blurted out, "and we wanted to give him a church burial." Apparently, the priest understood what they were asking, although he spoke in very broken English. "I'm sorry," he said, but we can bury only those of the same faith here." Weary after many months of war, the soldiers simply turned to walk away. "But," the old priest called after them, "you can bury him outside the fence."

Cynical and exhausted, the soldiers dug a grave and buried their friend just outside the white fence. They finished after nightfall. The next morning, the entire unit was ordered to move on, and the group raced back to the little church for one final goodbye to their friend. When they arrived, they couldn't find the gravesite. Tired and confused, they knocked on the door of the church. They asked the old priest if he knew where they had buried their friend. "It was dark last night and we were exhausted. We must have been disoriented."

A smile flashed across the old priest's face." After you left last night, I could not sleep, so I went outside early this morning and I moved the fence'

What fence is God calling us to move? What presumed privilege in our lives is Divine Grace calling us to dismantle? Grace can never be presumed or earned. Jesus came to push us off the over-furrowed ground of "what's fair" and "who is deserving" and on to the bounteous, unbounded land of God's equalizing, uncontainable, ever flowing grace.

That's why we call it "Amazing Grace." Will you sing it with me to close this sermon?
*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
 I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see!*

ⁱ Michael Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2002), pp.126-127