

Sermon for Sunday, August 24, 2025

Jonah 3:10-4:16

Matthew 20:1-16

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever had to navigate the claim by one of your children, "That's not fair!"? I have. As a teacher and a mother, when you live with or work with any preschool or elementary age children, one must always have thoughtful responses when the inevitable claim, "that's not fair!" is spoken.

Being Like Jesus (our theme for the month) means for today acting with justice or acting justly. Humans have defined justice in particular ways but the challenge of today's texts is to realize that God defines justice vastly differently than we humans do. In both of today's Scripture readings it would be very easy to insert ourselves into the story and shout out, "that's not fair!"

One of the questions that came up at Wednesday Evening Worship this week was: how in the world are these two texts connected? The short answer is that in both readings we see people looking at justice, at fairness, through a human lens. But we are brought up short when the stories teach us about the amazing perspective God takes when it comes to justice. "that's not fair!" is far different from God's perspective than from human ones.

We will begin with the text from Jonah and then move to the text from Matthew. We will imagine ourselves as characters in both texts and discover how easy it is to exclaim "that's not fair!"

The text from Jonah—for many a very familiar story. It begins with God instructing Jonah to go speak/proclaim to the people of the city of Ninevah that their destruction was near and that unless they repented God was going to destroy them. Jonah doesn't want to go and in fact initially travels in exactly the opposite direction. We all know that he was swallowed by a big fish and eventually spit out onto dry land. From that experience Jonah has learned his lesson and grudgingly goes to Ninevah.

Remember that Ninevah was an Assyrian city. The Assyrian army was cruel, some would say heartless, as it invaded and conquered various lands in the Middle East. As an Israelite, Jonah had seen the devastation wrought by that army and saw them as the ultimate in enemies. That's why he ran away; he didn't want to

confront them. But God had other plans. One significant point in the story of Jonah is that his repentance sermon is only eight words long, he is clearly not serious about preaching repentance to the Ninevites. Yet in spite of a brief sermon, the people of Ninevah believed the message, believed God, proclaimed a fast, and repented. Now these acts of repentance were the exact opposite of what Jonah desired. He would have much preferred his God to rain down revenge and destruction on them; reminiscent of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Today's reading from Jonah indicates that because of the acts of repentance performed by the Ninevites "God changed God's mind about the calamity that he said would be brought upon them and God did not do it." This decision made Jonah very angry.

"That's not fair!" If we put ourselves in Jonah's shoes for a moment we can surely see why he felt this way. How many of us have seen someone we truly dislike (perhaps even despise) repent, relent from cruelty, change? But Jonah knows something about God's nature when he states, "Jonah 4:2 That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." Ready to relent from punishing. My friends we have a gracious, merciful, and loving God who is always ready to forgive us. It's very easy for us to forget who has the last word in the judgment category. It's not you nor I; it's God. Casting judgement is very easy for us humans to do; and generally we make ourselves the winners and the other: whoever that might be, the losers. So whenever we find ourselves making judgments we must remember the story of Jonah because there is deep wisdom and understanding within it....a reminder that God is just, even when we are angry.

Let's move on now to the gospel reading from Matthew. First of all, the story is commonly labelled, "The Workers in the Vineyard." But it might just as appropriately be titled, *The Generous Landowner* because there is no description of the work occurring in the vineyard in this story. This story is about the illogical landowner who plays by his own economic rules when reimbursing the workers. As always when Jesus tells us a parable we start assigning new identities to the characters. It is reasonable to label the generous landowner as God...after all we do assert that God is the creator and owner of all the earth. And we acknowledge that the owner gets to make the final decisions. So there's that. The other identity that we can assign is to the workers in the vineyard.

They are clearly a motley group with early arrivals and some not hired on until the very end of the day. Let's just say it right away: those late hires weren't hired by anyone and we can guess why they weren't hired all day. They are likely ones who were judged unfit for work in the vineyard and ignored or overlooked.

The work day is over and it's time to hand out the paychecks. From our economic point of view all pay should be prorated based on the number of hours worked. That's only fair. But the landowner surprises everyone; the landowner is not concerned about economic fairness. No matter the length of time they worked, he pays everyone the agreed upon wage. And of course those early and hard-working arrivals who have borne the heat of the day and done the most work are angry. They *deserve* more, even though they are paid exactly what they agreed was an appropriate wage. And we hear them exclaim, "That's not fair!"

Why does Jesus tell this parable? One thing that helps us to understand it is the context. Jesus tells this parable immediately after Peter reminds him that he and the other disciples have left everything and followed him. There seems to be an expectation that there will be some ultimate or impressive reward for the "early adopters"; the disciples who have followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. And the short answer is that it doesn't work that way. "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." Recognize of course that the first AND the last will all be paid....given the promised reimbursement. It's easy for us to become frightened and fear that God's gonna run out before God gets to me—wherever I'm standing in the queue.

So why are these two Scripture readings paired together? The story of Jonah AND Jesus' parable both highlight the generosity of God. As the ultimate "landowner," God will use what has always belonged to the Creator for the good of all even if humans fail to view the world through God's eyes. These two Scripture readings are paired together because they show our human failings and point specifically to the perverse and unimaginable grace of God as God works for justice in the world. God's love for all of humanity is totally beyond our imagination.

At Luther's death in February of 1546, those attending him found a scrap of paper in his garment pocket with his brief last thoughts written upon it. The words read, "We are beggars. This is true."

My friends, we are the hated Ninevites. We are the late arrivals for work in the vineyard. We are the beggars, waiting with bated

breath, hoping and praying that God will be merciful to us. And we can give thanks to God when we hear of the mercy God extends to the Ninevites as well as to the late hires in Jesus' parable. Both of these stories help us to realize that our God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We might cry out "that's not fair!" as we look at the grace and mercy extended to others that we judge to be unfit. But God's justice is bound up with the fact that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for us and for all of humanity. All of us! And that's good news for today. Amen.