

God's 'Unfair' Graciousness

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

Matthew 20:1-16 Jonah 3:10-4:11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to begin this sermon by first reflecting upon the Old Testament reading we heard earlier from the Book of Jonah. Chances are that everyone in this sanctuary this morning is familiar with the story of Jonah. What most of us remember, however, is simply the first half of the story. And more likely than not, only the children's church school version at that.

Less familiar is the specific mission that God calls Jonah to in the first place – to go to the large, wicked Gentile city of Nineveh and tell them to repent and turn to God or the city will be destroyed. Jonah delivers this message, and much to his surprise the Ninevites repent from their evil ways and turn to God, thus the city is spared.

Even less familiar to most of us is what happens next in the story. Instead of being pleased that he is successful in his mission and that the city isn't destroyed, Jonah becomes angry. He complains to God, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? 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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." What a strange response.

After God questions whether Jonah has the right to be angry, Jonah heads out of the city and waits to see what would become of it. God, continuing to be gracious to Jonah even after his little tantrum, appoints a bush to grow, thus providing him shade and saving him from his discomfort. Jonah is very happy about the bush. But in a bit of a twist that will lead to the lesson that God wishes to teach Jonah, a worm is appointed by God the next morning to attack and kill the bush. When the sun beats down on Jonah he becomes faint and again cries out, "It is better for me to die than to live." (It's clear that Jonah would have never made it through this past hot summer here in Tulsa.)

God again questions whether it is right for Jonah to be angry about the bush. Jonah replies, "Yes, angry enough to die." (Many of us at this point would just as soon let him have his wish, but not God.) God questions Jonah's concern for the bush – which Jonah did not grow himself – and then God asks why God shouldn't be concerned about the people of Nineveh, whom we are told did not know their right hand from their left.

That's where the story ends. **Like a parable, which many biblical scholars actually believe this story is, we are left hanging, not knowing Jonah's next move. We are meant to question for ourselves what we would do if we were in Jonah's shoes.**

Would we continue to be angry that God has the right to be gracious, forgiving and merciful to whom God chooses – even to people we despise – or will we come to see the radical equality and grace which God extends to all people?

The lesson we hopefully learn in and through the story of Jonah, as well as in Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers that we will look at briefly in just a moment, is one of the most important lessons we can learn about God, and about ourselves. Jonah, like the vineyard workers who labored the longest in the fields but were only paid the same amount as those workers who came late in the day, doesn't really like what he *already* knows about the nature and character of God.

Both Old Testament and New Testament biblical teachings reveal that God is indeed 'gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness (Jonah 4:2). But the problem comes when we want God to extend that graciousness to us but not to those whom we judge as undeserving.

I would venture to guess that most people have a very good intuitive sense of fairness, of knowing the rules and when we or someone else breaks them. Most children, for example, become quite vocal when someone else isn't playing by the rules or isn't being fair. It's common to hear this in protests like, "It's my turn," "He hit me first," or "She cheated."

All in all, a strong sense of fairness is a wonderful gift, which many of us continue to develop into a sense of social justice, especially as it relates to issues of equality and human rights. That which we consider fair or unfair plays an important part in guiding many of our thoughts, actions, and reactions.

It is out of a violated sense of fairness, for example, that we should be offended by today's parable of the workers in the vineyard. It presents a radical reversal of cultural understandings, in this instance as it relates to worker compensation. Does not our own Protestant work ethic also demand that those who work the longest hours should get paid the most? This parable, however, is not really addressing that issue of "equal pay for the equal amount of work." Instead, it helps to exhibit a very common theme in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the realm of God, "the first shall be last and last shall be first" – a reversal of fortunes. Somehow, this is how things are in the kingdom of God.

The workers who were hired at 5 p.m. and labored for only 1 hour received an entire day's wage, one denarius – that which is needed daily to simply survive. A denarius was also given to the workers who were hired at 3 p.m., noon, and 9 a.m. The landowner was seen by these folks to be extremely generous.

When it came time to pay the workers who had labored since 6 a.m., the entire 12 hours, they too were given just one denarius. Naturally they complain. But put yourself in their shoes. **Is it wrong to anticipate and expect getting more than the persons who worked for only one hour, even though that is the what they agreed to in the first place?**

Isn't this, at least on some level, unfair? What about the work ethic, the merit system, the principle of justice? This is when we learn that God's kingdom, God's economy, doesn't run on the same set of standards as the world's.

The grace of God does not rest on the merit system. And at some other level, we must admit that that offends us. We wonder if grace does not undermine the whole reason for being good, or observing standards, or keeping rules, or living justly.

We second-guess a God who breaches the system and equalizes the pay like this – giving everybody their daily bread. **Shouldn't our reward be greater for being better Christians? Don't all these stars in our crown count for something?**

The offensive character of grace also affects the relationship between those who work all day and the laborers who came late. The first became envious of the

generosity shown the others. They cannot handle the fact that the landowner put these latecomers on the same par with them. **Again, like Jonah, these grumblers are not really against grace; they're simply against grace shown to others whom they feel don't deserve it.**

We learn that divine grace, however, is a great equalizer that strips away presumed privilege and entitlement, thus putting all recipients on an even playing field. That's hard to stomach when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system and want to see some reward for our labors. That's hard to stomach when we discover that divine generosity has been extended those guilty of wrongs we have long opposed (for example, racism, sexism, heterosexism, nationalism, and the like). Grace no longer seems so sentimental, so amazing.

This parable is meant to lead us to relate most with those all-day workers – those who claim seniority, privilege or entitlement. Beyond Jesus' original meaning for this parable, the gospel writer, Matthew, meant to **apply this teaching to the Christian Church.**

When applied to a congregation, those all-day workers can mean the members who have been at the church the longest, or those in positions of leadership, or those who pledge the most money. This can and often does cause tension with newcomers, especially with those who come with new and different ideas of how the church should run, or those with a significantly different social background or economic status.

Churches can indeed be guilty of building up a sense of hierarchy within their membership. Like those first workers in the vineyard, some feel they deserve more because they have contributed more – more time, more talent, more resources. When others are seen to get equal treatment, in whatever form that may come (including the attention from the pastor), **envy and resentment can follow.**

BUT, and here's the real twist, what if we were to see ourselves as the eleventh-hour workers? In that case, we are all the ones who get much more than what we think we deserve. God's 'unfair' graciousness is then seen for what it truly is: God gracious generosity. We learn that being humble is essential to understanding grace.

In the kingdom of God, the way we are to live in the here and now, the merit system is thrown out. There are no stars for our crown. We serve God and others not for reward and prestige, but out of a grateful response to God's love and goodness to us. In God's kingdom, no one gets less than what is promised.

When we focus on giving thanks for our own blessings instead of complaining to God about what others get, God's generosity and indiscriminate love still may not look fair, but they sure look great! So reflect this week upon how has God been graciously fair and generous to you!

I wonder if Jonah ever came to understand this.

Amen.