

Is God's Grace Unfair?

The Parable of the Vineyard Workers

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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This is going to be a bit of a Bible study sermon. And I want to begin with our Old Testament reading from the Book of Jonah. How well do you know the entire story of Jonah? Most of us, since childhood, remember the part about Jonah running away from God and being swallowed up by a huge fish (the Bible never said it was a whale), where Jonah stayed for three days before being regurgitated up on a beach.

Less familiar is the specific mission that God calls Jonah to in the first place. God commands Jonah to go to the very large, wicked Gentile city of Nineveh, the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire. The ruins of this ancient city, by the way, are near the modern day city of Mosul, in northern Iraq, which was recently taken over by ISIS.

Jonah is to tell them (the Ninevites, not ISIS) to repent and turn to God, otherwise the city will be destroyed. Jonah delivers this message, and much to his surprise the Ninevites *do* repent from their evil ways and turn to God. Therefore, God spares the city.

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. That's quite odd, because according to story, he delivered probably the shortest and most effective sermon in history. With the economy of just eight words, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be destroyed," a city with a population estimated to be around 120,000, turned from their evil ways. Oh that sermons today were that effective...and that short!

Instead of celebrating his Mission Accomplished, however, Jonah 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 plant to grow, thus providing him shade, saving him from his discomfort. Jonah is very happy about the plant. 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." God again questions whether it is right for Jonah to be angry about the plant. 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 plant – 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. It's open ended. **Like a parable, which many biblical scholars actually believe this story to be, 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 problem comes when we want God to extend that graciousness to us but not to those whom we judge as undeserving. We cry foul, and get upset that God doesn't play by the rules of fairness. Doesn't justice demand that people get what they deserve?

I would venture to guess that basically all people, including and especially children, have a very good intuitive sense of what is fair, and what is not; of knowing the rules and when we or someone else breaks them. **All in all, a strong sense of fairness is a wonderful gift to possess, which many of us continue to nurture into a sense of social justice, especially as it relates to issues of equality and human rights.**

It is out of a violated sense of fairness, in fact, that we *should* be offended by today's parable of the workers in the vineyard. Jesus presents a radical reversal of cultural understandings, in this instance seems to relate 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 addressing the issue of "equal pay for the equal amount of work." Instead, it exhibits 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.

The workers who were hired at 5 p.m. and labored for only 1 hour received an entire day's wage, one denarius – which is what was 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. But 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. Put yourself in their shoes. **Is it wrong to anticipate and expect getting a bonus or a little extra than the persons who worked for only one hour, even though that is 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, we learn, does not rest on the merit system. If it did, then it wouldn't be grace. And at some 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 and with good ethics. Shouldn't our reward be greater for being better people? 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. (here's a parallel to this between the older and younger brothers in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.) The first workers become envious of the generosity shown the others. To which the landowner states, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or **are you envious because I am generous?**" (v. 15).

Again, like Jonah, these grumblers are not really against grace; they're simply against equal grace shown to others whom they feel haven't worked hard or long

enough to earn it. We learn a valuable lesson here about divine grace. **Grace is the great equalizer that strips away our presumed privilege and entitlement. God's grace puts all recipients on an even playing field.**

That's hard to stomach when we have burdened ourselves with a merit system, wanting to see some extra reward or bonus for all our labors and hard work. 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, fundamentalism, and a recent Oklahoma state representative's Islamophobia). The grace of God no longer seems so sentimental, or 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 find a parallel with the members who have been at the church the longest, or those in positions of leadership, or those who give the most money.** This can cause tension with newcomers, especially with those who bring new and different ideas of how the church could be run, or those with a significantly different social background or economic status.

Yes, 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 of the pastor), envy and resentment sometimes follow.**

However, and here's the real twist, what if all of us were to see ourselves as the eleventh-hour workers, those who came at the very end of the day? In that case, we are the ones who receive much more than what seems fair. God's 'unfair' graciousness is then seen for what it truly is: God gracious generosity to all. We also learn, then, that **a position of humility is essential to recognizing God's generous grace.**

So in the kingdom of God, which I define (in part) as the way we are to live and be in relationship with all creation 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 or 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 to everyone.

Inevitably, we must face the same question that in Jesus' parable comes from the landowner, and therefore God, **"Are you envious because I am generous?"** The literal Greek translation from which we get the word "envious" is "evil eye." So this verse can be translated a bit more graphically as, "Is your eye evil because I [God] am generous?"

And this may help. To quote Presbyterian author and preacher Thomas Long, **"God's generosity spills over the levees we have built to contain it and surges mercifully over the landscape of human life."**

Reflect this week upon how has God been graciously fair and generous to you, and how all people are beloved by God! I wonder if Jonah ever came to understand this.

Amen.