

Proper 20A  
Peace, Seattle  
September 21, 2014  
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16

## **GOD'S INFURIATING GENEROSITY**

**It's dinnertime and you're ready to check out at the grocery store, but there aren't enough checkers, so the lines are long...**

- And you're one person away from unloading your cart, and your ice cream is beginning to melt, and the woman ahead of you can't find her debit card...
- And they call for an extra checker, and you see him coming, but you're hemmed in by People Magazines and National Enquirers, and you can't move,
- And SOMEBODY who hasn't even been in line, rolls her cart to the newly opened checkout lane, and is on her way home before you can even get your melting ice cream in the bag.

**IT'S NOT FAIR. And your mind fills up with uncharitable thoughts, and it's hard not to feel resentful.**

**The human species is hard-wired to judge when a something is fair and when it's unfair. Well, this morning we're given two stories about fairness and resentment, about who deserves what; and about the generosity of God.**

**First, there's the TAIL END (pun intended) of JONAH.**

**Reluctant Jonah—who God stuck in the belly of a fish for three days to get his attention—finally does the job God appointed him to do:**

**He goes to Nineveh, that great, wicked city, and preaches repentance.**

And as a result, the entire country, from King to errand boy turns from their evil ways and seeks forgiveness. Even the animals get into the act.

**Now you'd think Jonah would be happy about that, but he's not. He's disappointed. WHY? God sees the Ninevites' sincerity, changes his mind, and decides not to destroy the city after all.**

**I KNEW IT! cries Jonah, shaking his fist at God. I KNEW YOU'D BE MERCIFUL!  
THAT'S WHY I DIDN'T WANT TO COME HERE IN THE FIRST PLACE!**

Jonah didn't want Nineveh to go to the back of the line—he wanted them to be kicked out of the store altogether, and there goes God opening up another line and letting Nineveh on through.  
**It's NOT FAIR.**

**Jonah isn't resentful because God is too harsh, but because God is too generous.**

**Today's gospel has a similar theme.**

Jesus tells of a landowner who hires laborers for his vineyard—some at sun up, others at points throughout the day, and still others only an hour before quitting time. At the end of the day they line up for their pay, and instead of paying each group according to the number of hours worked, he pays them all the same. And that's when the grumbling starts.

**LOOK, say the all day workers, THOSE GUYS WORKED ONE MEASLY HOUR, WHILE WE BENT OUR BACKS FOR TWELVE—AND YOU PAID US BOTH THE SAME? THAT'S NOT FAIR!**

FRIEND, the owner replies, I'VE DONE YOU NO WRONG. I GAVE YOU WHAT I PROMISED.  
AM I NOT ALLOWED TO DO WHAT I CHOOSE WITH WHAT BELONGS TO ME?  
OR ARE YOU ENVIIOUS BECAUSE I AM GENEROUS?

**Going behind the scenes of Jesus' parable is instructive, for the community to which Matthew addresses this gospel 50 years or more after Christ is widely diverse.**

- (1) There are conservative Jewish Christians holding fast the Torah tradition even while they worship Jesus.
- (2) And there are moderate Jewish Christians who want the church's mission to include non-Jews.
- (3) There are Gentile Christians looking for a way to follow Jesus within the context of their own culture.
- (4) And there are Gentile Christians who reject Jewish roots in the name of freedom.

It doesn't take much imagination to see the tensions that would exist between these groups. And today's parable, for its first hearers, takes aim at some of those tensions.

**To faithful Jewish Christians who've been in it from the beginning, Jesus seems to say:** Don't worry—at the end of the day you'll get what God promised. But remember—to make room for others—and don't get caught up in quibbling over who deserves what—that's my department.

**While to those who have entered the kingdom vineyard only lately, Jesus seems to say:** You're equal participants in what we're about, no matter when you arrived. I'm relying on you...and I'll take care of you.

**But there are deeper economic issues at work in this parable as well.**

The reason you go to work for someone else's vineyard may very well be because you have been taxed off your own property. And now, instead of working your own land, you have to work for someone else.

Every time I go to **Home Depot**, I see guys in the parking lot waiting to be hired for work. Ever wondered what it's like to wait and wait and no one calls?

**When the first wave of hires in the parable hop into the Master's pickup, they experience the JOY of being hired, of having work to do—and knowing they'll bring something home that day.**

But somewhere along the line, the JOY of meaningful work turns into WHAT WILL I GET OUT OF IT? And in the end, instead of the satisfaction of a good days work and a full day's wage to show for it, they become disgruntled because of the Master's generosity.

**He gave them what he promised**, which sounded good enough at first, but at the end of the day, after everyone else is paid, his generosity leaves them feeling short changed.

**This story subverts the normal order of things. The last are first, and the first are last. God's grace is offensive—because people don't getting what they deserve.**

**There are many conversations going on in our world around fairness these days.**

- (1) The conversation around a \$15 an hour minimum wage is about what's fair for working families.
- (2) The conversation around school funding is about what's fair and appropriate for students.
- (3) Last week's vote on Scottish independence was, at its core, a referendum on fairness:

Do the Scots get back their fair share of all the resources they contribute to the UK, as well as a fair shake in the decision making process?

**Being fair is a good thing. Justice in the workplace is important. I want fairness. You want fairness. Jonah wanted fairness. The all-day workers wanted fairness.**

**But what if our relationship with God isn't first and foremost about fairness?  
What if relationship with God isn't first and foremost about what I get from God?**

**Truth be told, if the supreme attribute we place on God's shoulders is fairness, then we're all in a heap of trouble...** [[all fall short of the glory of God...]]

**Ultimately, these stories are not about God's FAIRNESS but rather God's GENEROSITY. Ultimately, the question becomes: Can God be trusted to provide out of God's abundance for everyone's need?**

The ANXIETY we heard in the voices of those all day workers arose in them, as it arises in us, when we begin to fear that maybe THERE WON'T BE ENOUGH FOR ME, and then we look at what others are getting and begin to complain or manipulate or resent or hoard.

**Jesus invites us to live our lives a different way.**

**At the center of reality lies God's heart of compassion.** A heart that does not reward us according to what we deserve, or according to human scales of fairness, but rather surprises and confounds and gifts us with a relationship and a promise reaching beyond expectation.

That promise was embodied in Jesus, whose journey to the cross, opened for us and for all a path toward abundant life—resurrected life the likes of which the world, and we ourselves, struggle to comprehend. But in the end, we don't need to comprehend it. We only have to receive it.

**This morning Christ is in our midst once again**, offering himself in the bread and wine, his sacred meal, and inviting us all, young and old, wealthy and poor, first in line and last in line, to receive these gifts which, when opened, will bring us new life.

Amen.