

“That’s not Fair!” said Jonah | Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-6, 37-45
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St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Franklin, TN
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I want to begin by thinking back to the reading from Jonah. I’m thinking that – for a lot of us – this is a story that we have grown up hearing, and so there’s a danger that we don’t realize how absolutely crazy it is.

The whole book of Jonah is crazy – by which I mean it’s constantly doing the unexpected. You might remember how it goes: Jonah was a prophet – but he was not one of the dedicated, brave, zealous prophets we expect to read about in the Bible – the prophets that felt God’s word like a fire in their bones (Jeremiah 20:9). Instead, as the great biblical scholars Larry the Cucumber and Bob the Tomato teach us:

Jonah was a prophet. Oo-oo!
But he really never got it. Sad but true!
And if you watch him you can spot it. A-doodley-doo!
He did not get the point.¹

God told Jonah to travel to the city of Nineveh and preach to them that God sees their wickedness. But immediately Jonah takes off in the opposite direction, across the Mediterranean Sea. And then come all the exciting parts we remember from Sunday School: a big storm at sea; Jonah being tossed overboard and then swallowed by a really big fish, spending three days and three nights in its belly, until finally Jonah begs that God save him. And God does save Jonah, telling the fish to spit Jonah up on to land. And this time Jonah does go to Nineveh, and he yells condemnations in the streets: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And then two really unexpected things happen.

First, Jonah’s message is successful. This is weird because most of the time in the Bible, we see the messages of prophets fall on unlistening ears. But the people of Nineveh hear and believe Jonah’s message, they repent, and God shows them mercy. It’s even weirder when we realize that Jonah didn’t tell them to repent and turn back to God; he just told them they were doomed. And yet still the people realized they needed to turn to God.

And the second unexpected thing is this: what we would call Jonah’s success makes him furious. Or rather, it’s God’s mercy towards these sinful Ninevites that makes Jonah so angry. Jonah uses words of praise from the Psalms to yell at 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.

¹ “Jonah was a Prophet” from *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie*.

In other words: Jonah ran from God's call because he didn't want God to show mercy to those people. It's like Jonah is saying: *I knew you would show mercy – and that's not fair!* A strange thing to hear from a prophet, right?

But it gets stranger.

After God saves Nineveh, Jonah goes away to sulk. He spends a day in the shade of a bush, and he loves that bush because it kept him safe from the burning heat of the sun. He *loves* that bush. He loves that bush more than people.

“What?” you say, “That's crazy!”

Why yes it is – but it's true. When the bush withers, Jonah falls into hopelessness. When God showed mercy instead of destroying the people of Nineveh, Jonah was furious that God saved the people. When God destroyed a bush, Jonah is just as furious that God didn't save the bush. Put more bluntly: If Jonah had had his way, all the people in Nineveh would have been destroyed, and the bush would still be alive.

And God responds to Jonah's out-of-whack priorities:

You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?

Think about that for a minute. God used a plant to try and get Jonah to care more about people.

And that's the end of the book of Jonah. God asks Jonah, basically, *If you can care so much for a single plant that you didn't even grow, can't you see how much I care for these thousands of individuals that I have created and that are in need of help?* And that's it. No response from Jonah. We don't get to know if Jonah got the point. Instead, God's question is left hanging in the air.

And all of you English teachers out there know what that means: the question is left hanging in the air *for us* – for us to ask, for us to think about, for us to answer for ourselves.

If we care so much for the people and animals and even the things that we love, can we understand how God cares for the entire world that God brought into being and nurtures and guides day by day?

Do we really understand how much God cares? How widely and mercifully God cares? Even about sinners; even about foreign lands (Nineveh was not in Israel); even about animals?

And if we do catch that breathless view of God's mercy – will it change us? Or are we, like Jonah, too busy being frustrated at God's mercy towards people we think deserve less? Do we ever care more for the plants in our yard than for our neighbors who are hurting? Are we too busy feeling: "That's not fair!" to let God's mercy flow freely through us?

That's also the question behind the parable that Jesus tells in today's Gospel reading. A landowner hires day-laborers throughout the day. He hires the first group first thing in the morning; decides he could use another group of workers at 9, and at noon, and at 3, and then at 5 o'clock he hires one more group. When evening comes, they all quit working at the same time – which means some have worked all day, and some have worked only an hour or two. But the landowner plays everyone the same: a day's wage.

That's not fair, right? That's what the early morning group of laborers says. "These last worked only for an hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

But the landowner replies: "I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

God is generous. God is merciful. God is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And it is not fair. But that's who God is.

I want to take a minute to clarify this, though.

God does care about justice. We hear that over and over again in the scriptures. But remember that old familiar phrase we hear Jesus say at the end of today's Gospel reading: "The last will be first, and the first will be last"? I think that contains the key to understanding God's justice and God's unfair, generous mercy.

When the "last" people in a society – the sinners everyone condemns; the poor; the lost; the left-out; the foreigners; those with disabilities; the marginalized – when these people are mistreated, abused, ignored, oppressed – then God always demands justice, demands righting of wrongs, demands that all God's children be taken care of. And that means that the "first" people might have to become more generous, to share their resources, to use their power in the world for the sake of those who usually come in last. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

So what can seem unfair is that God's justice is shaped by God's mercy – especially God's spiritual *and physical* mercy towards the "last" people. Sinners are forgiven; the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are filled with good things; the voices of unimportant are heard – and it has nothing to do with what they (or we) have earned or deserve – God does these things based on our needs and God's mercy. That's when God is unfair. That's God's mercy.

The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Not because God is unjust – but because God is so merciful.

And, dear Church, this unfair mercy is not just for God to do through miraculous intervention in our world – we, as people of God, are called to show this unfair mercy in our lives, too. As the Book of Micah says:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

So may we too live into God’s desire that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. May we resist the urge to say, “That’s not fair,” when we see an opportunity for mercy. May we see God’s unfair generosity, mercy, steadfast love, and grace as reasons for praise and celebration – not only when God gives these things to us, but when they come alive in anyone – especially those most desperate for generosity and mercy.

Let us pray.

O God, from your providing hand even the dissatisfied and grumbling receive what they need for their lives. Teach us your ways of justice and lead us to practice your generosity, so that we may live a life worthy of the gospel make known through your Son Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.²

2 Scripture Prayer (Series 1, Semicontinuous) for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A. From the Vanderbilt Divinity Library’s Revised Common Lectionary resource page. Reproduced from *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002). <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=160>