

**On September 24, 2017, Pastor Joel Krueger preached a sermon entitled "It's Not Fair", based on the lectionary passages Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16. Here he talks about our concepts of fairness in contrast to God's mercy and abounding steadfast love.**

When I was a boy I had a particular desire in life, and perhaps many of you may have experienced that same kind of desire when you were young, or you may have heard your children or grandchildren proclaim their wish, that everything should be "fair."

It seems that from a very young age, we develop a concept of what is fair and what is not. Dictionary.com gives a definition of "fair" as "*free from bias, dishonesty, or injustice*" and Merriam-Webster has as part of its definition, "*marked by impartiality and honesty :free from self-interest, prejudice, or favoritism.*" It seems to me that as children, we want things to be equal. No one should get more than another person. All should be treated the same.

When I would go to my Aunt Nina's for lunch, I would always line my glass up next to my cousin Sara's, to make sure we got the exact same amount of milk. I would complain to my parents about my brother Scott, who was 6 years older than I, "*Why doesn't Scott have to make his bed? I always make my bed. It's not fair!*" Or "*Why doesn't Scott have to eat all his vegetables? I have to eat mine. It's not fair!*" Or as I got a bit older and wanted to hang out and do what some of the other kids were doing, I might hear, "*If all your friends were jumping off a bridge, would you do it too?*" Or, "*Just because so-and-so's kids are doing it, doesn't make it right. Besides, you're not so-and-so's kid. You're **our** kid!*" So much in life just didn't seem fair!

And so it is with Jonah, in our reading today. We have this wonderful story about this reluctant prophet, Jonah. Actually, I discovered that there was an actual person named Jonah in the 8th

century B.C. who was a prophet from Galilee, but this story is not one based on any historical event, but is rather more like a parable, a story that gives a lesson.

So here we have this man Jonah, who is called by God, to go and prophesy to the people of Ninevah, a city of 120,000 people, the capital of the great Assyrian empire. For Jonah, these would be enemies, and people whose customs and traditions are seen as wicked and evil. They are a people whom his God, the God of Israel, should despise. And in the story, God does see the evil that exists in their midst, and that is why God has called Jonah to go and prophesy against them, to warn them that they better change their ways!

But Jonah doesn't want to go and be the prophet to the people of Ninevah, and so he runs. And we have this whole little story of Jonah's adventure of being caught in a storm, thrown off of the ship, being swallowed by a giant fish, and then being spit up onto the beach, where God finds him again and calls him to prophesy to the people of Ninevah. And he finally gives in. And when he does go and prophesy, lo and behold, the people heed his warning and repent! They put on sack-cloth and ashes and repent of their wicked and evil ways. And to Jonah's chagrin, God forgives them!

I love that line where Jonah says to God, "*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.*" Jonah is mad and angry that God is loving and

merciful. He wants what is *fair*. Or perhaps he might call it, *justice*. He wants *justice*. He wants these people to get what they *deserve*.

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Jonah***

Now the story can be seen as having a number of lessons. One might be that you cannot run away from God. That when God calls us, we need to listen and respond. It could be seen as a *parody*, that, instead of telling about an obedient servant of God, tells about this recalcitrant prophet who wants nothing to do with God's mercy. It is surely a story that reminds Israel of their mission, to be the voice to the nations, telling them of God's love and mercy for all. But it is also a story, about understanding that what we see as fair or just, isn't always what God sees. That indeed, it is as God says in Isaiah, "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, declares the Lord.*" (Is. 55:8).

Jesus' parable from the gospel of Matthew, about the laborers in the vineyard, also touches on the issue of fairness. Workers are hired at different hours throughout the day, but when it comes time for them to receive their pay, they all receive the same. Now throughout history, this passage has been understood differently. Ancient theologians have seen this as allegory, viewing those hired at different times of the day as representative of different generations of Israel, such as Adam,

Moses, Abraham and in the last hour Gentiles. Others have interpreted the early workers as Christ's original disciples (recall their words "*Look, we have left everything and followed you!*" Matt. 19:27), and the later comers as other Jewish Christians, and then the recent Gentile converts to Matthew's congregation (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4, p.92).

Certainly, this parable, rubs up against our sense of fairness, of what is right, and what is deserved. Yet, if we think on what this parable is about, the *Kingdom of God*, that is, the way God desires us to live in *relationship* with one another, we might just gain some insight.

Remember that the call of the land owner is to come and work in the vineyard. If the work in the vineyard is all about *personal gain*, then yes, we can understand the frustration of the earliest workers, who labored all day under the hot sun. But what if it is not all about *personal gain*? What if it is not about the *wages*? What if what God is calling us to is about something else?

At House Church, I shared this story. When I was in seminary I had to work in a hospital to fulfill my Clinical Pastoral Education requirement. I worked at Methodist Hospital in Minneapolis, on the Oncology ward. There I met an old woman, dying of cancer whom, I was told was angry about something, and wanted to talk to the chaplain. It seems she had a friend, a girl she grew up with, who had never been a very good girl. She referred to her as a "*floozy*." Her pastor had told her, that if her friend repented of her sins, that God would forgive her. And that just did not seem right to this woman, who had lived her whole life, trying to be good, even when it wasn't easy. She could not understand why this woman might get into heaven, right

along with her? It just wasn't fair. It seems that for this woman, the life of faith was about getting a reward. And I don't recall much of what I said to her, but I might have at least wondered, if this is your friend, don't you want her to be in heaven with you?

If we see our work in God's vineyard, as our passage to our own personal heaven, or to some just reward, I think we are missing the real point. What if we understood the call to work in the vineyard, as an opportunity, as a call to participate in God's mercy and abounding steadfast love? What if we could look over the great amount of work that needed to be done in God's vineyard and welcomed every single worker that came in, no matter when they got there? What if we could open our hearts with joy and enthusiasm every time we were introduced to a new worker in that vineyard of God's, who was ready to help us, to work alongside us, and help grow the vineyard that God is preparing?

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Each of us is being called by God. We, as a *church* are being called to work *together*, in God's vineyard. We may not be receiving the call to prophesy words of judgment as Jonah was, but we should surely be rejoicing when someone or some people come to know the love and mercy of God. And perhaps that is part of our calling, to carry that message of God's love and acceptance and mercy and blessing to those who need to hear it, wherever they are. And when others join us in this work, may our *joy* be in the *sharing* of God's reward, whether *fair* or not.

For God's aim is not to be *fair* but to be *generous in love*. Or as Jonah reminds us, "*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.*" May we, in all we think, do and say, seek in earnest, to make our ways, the ways of this God, our God of love. Amen.