

It isn't fair

Every child must face the hard lesson that life doesn't always go the way they would like. They may wonder why they were left out of an event that all their friends were invited to. Or why a classmate seems to be favored by a coach or teacher when that person never seems to work as hard. Or why did they have to get sick the day before a big holiday. "It isn't fair," the child might say. And as parents, we just might give the standard reply to those situations: Well, life isn't fair.

We struggle with this even as adults. Things don't turn out the way they we expected, and we get upset. It isn't fair when the boss overlooks me, a dedicated worker, but promotes her favorite, even though he is barely competent. It isn't fair when a young, vibrant friend of ours is diagnosed with a serious, chronic illness. It isn't fair that people who already have a lot of money seem to get more than their share of good financial breaks, while hardworking folks who live from paycheck to paycheck never seem to catch a break. Young or old, we encounter this truth about life – an obvious, but rather difficult lesson: Life just is not fair.

This is part of being human, and it has been part of the human story forever. In the Old Testament lesson we heard this morning, poor old Jonah is upset because not only is life unfair, it seems that God is not always fair. And Jonah struggles mightily with this.

Jonah was the reluctant prophet called by the Lord to preach repentance to the people of the wicked city of Nineveh. Immediately, Jonah ran the other way, and caught a ship headed for Tarshish, in an attempt to get away from God. God then brought forth a terrible storm on the seas, Jonah tells the sailors it is because of him, and at his request, the crew tosses Jonah overboard. There in the deep, Jonah spent three days in the belly of the whale. Finally, Jonah is spit up onto shore, and finally obeys God's call to go to Nineveh. But Jonah is still grouchy about it. His message is not one of kindness and mercy. No, he just walks around the city for the entire day, shouting "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

This is not exactly an encouraging sermon from Jonah. It's not the tactic I would choose to tell people of God's love and forgiveness. But you know what? It works. The entire city repents. They fast and pray and put on sackcloth. The scriptures describe that they turn to the Lord so thoroughly, that not only the humans, but even the animals are commanded to fast for three days and wear sackcloth. Talk about repentance! God accepted their repentance. The Lord forgave them and chose not to destroy them for their former wickedness.

Well, Jonah didn't like this. Not a bit. The reason? Because it wasn't fair. Jonah was angry about it, angry enough to die. "You know God," he shouts, "This is just what I was afraid of. This is why I never wanted to come here. Here is a whole city of sinful, no-good Ninevites, and what do you do? You show them mercy and love; you treat them like your own. Those people! How can you treat sinners this way? I can't stand it. So, go ahead God, just kill me. Take my life. It's better for me to die than to live."

"Is it right for you to be angry?" God asks. Jonah doesn't answer; instead, he goes off and sulks. Yet God is still gracious, even to grumpy Jonah, and so the Lord sends a bush to give Jonah some shade out there in the desert, making Jonah very happy. The next day, God sends a worm to destroy the bush, and Jonah gets angry again. "Here I am, a good person, doing what God asks, and I can't even get some shade. How fair is this?" Again, God asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah, who is still fuming over the whole Nineveh thing, replies, "Yes. Angry enough to die."

Jonah had to face that annoying lesson that life isn't fair. What would be fair is for people to get what they deserve. The people of Nineveh are sinners, at least they were up until a day or two ago, and so they deserve God's punishment. "I'm out here in the heat of the sun after working the whole day walking and preaching, and you would think that I deserve a little shade and relaxation. But no, God. You give everyone in Nineveh your love and compassion, and to me you send a vicious little worm and a scorching wind. How fair is that?"

"Well, Jonah," God is saying, "Life isn't always fair." Life is not always going to meet your expectations. But what matters – and here is the real lesson – is that God's love is constant. God's mercy and compassion are steadfast. You can trust that. And so, I forgive Nineveh, God says, even though they are sinners, because I love them. And I forgive you, Jonah, even when you're foolish and angry because I love you. Know this: God's love and mercy – that is for everyone.

Jesus was obviously familiar with the story of Jonah, for he talks about Jonah elsewhere in the gospels. Jesus was also familiar with the idea of God's unfair, abundant mercy. To help teach his disciples about the ways of God, what Jesus calls the kingdom of God, Jesus tells them this parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out very early in the morning, probably around 6:00 am, to hire laborers for this vineyard. In Jesus' day, most people lived on the fringes of the economic system, and it was common for carpenters, artisans, and others, to go into the village in the morning in hopes of finding work. There, they would watch and wait for an opportunity. The landowner sees some people just standing around, and he hires them for the usual wage – a denarius – and he sends them off to work.

A few hours later, around nine, he goes out again, sees others standing idle, and sends them off to work, promising to pay them “whatever is right.” This same thing happens again at noon, and at three in the afternoon, and finally, at about 5:00 – ten or eleven hours since he hired the first workers. The landowner finds more people standing around, and he sends them off to work as well.

Evening comes, and it is time to pay all the workers. Already we notice something is up, because the last workers are invited to come forward first to get their pay. And they receive the usual daily wage. And so, it is with those who came at five, and then those who showed up at three, and so on. When the first workers come forward, those who had been there since early morning, they were thinking that they would receive more; after all, they had been working the whole time. But when they are paid, they receive what everyone else does: a denarius, the daily wage.

Naturally, they were angry, and they grumbled. “These guys worked only one hour. One hour! And those workers only worked three. I’ve been out here since 6 am, working in the hot sun. I was out there in the marketplace looking for work, while these guys were probably home asleep. And you’re paying us the same amount?”

Of course, they were mad. It wasn’t fair. They weren’t all equal – some really did work harder and longer, and they were more deserving. What kind of business are you running? This isn’t fair!

The landowner replies, “Are you angry because of my generosity? Listen, my friends, I have done you no wrong. You have been paid what you need for the day. And the others, they, too, have been paid for what they need for the day. It is not based on your deserving, or your work, but on my being generous and compassionate to everyone.”

Well, this is not the way most people would run a business. But Jesus is not talking business, he is talking about the kingdom of God, and in that kingdom, it is rarely business as usual. The ways of the kingdom will constantly call our old ways into question.

Jesus is teaching a lesson here. And if you put yourself into the story, as one of the workers who showed up at 6:00 am, it is a hard lesson. What happened to a solid work ethic? What happened to seniority? What about my solid work record? “Good heavens,” Jesus, “What do you mean the first will be last and the last will be first?”

This may be a hard lesson, but like the story from Jonah, it also comes with an amazing piece of good news. God is outrageously generous, to the point of breaking our little notions of what is fair and what isn’t. As it turns out, insisting on things like status and competition,

and rank and merit, all of that can get in the way of us receiving God's grace. Grace is not about fairness. Our worth in God's eyes is not based on fairness, or who earns it. Fairness comes and goes. Fair depends on where you are standing. Jonah thought God was fair when he was in the shade under the bush, and that God was unfair when the bush was gone, and the sun and wind arrived. But wasn't God love always there?

There is that powerful line from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: only faith, hope and love last. That is what God is talking about here. What lasts is love, forgiveness, compassion. That is what we call the good news. Our worth comes from grace. Our salvation is all about grace. Joy comes from grace. And grace that is given freely, generously, to everyone, regardless of when or how they show up. So, the last shall be first and the first shall be last, Jesus says. Everyone is part of the kingdom: those who came at 6 am, those who came hours later. Jesus says that we are all bound together by love, and that makes the kingdom a new kind of community. Rejoice in the last. Rejoice in the first. Rejoice in Israel, and Nineveh, too. Rejoice in everyone receiving a full measure of what God is offering.

The truth is all of us are latecomers. All of us here today are enjoying the fruits of a harvest planted by Christians for the past 2000 years. In the grand scheme of history, we are the ones who have arrived at the last hour. Like the people of Nineveh, we are all sinners in need of God's love and mercy.

Every Sunday we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, Communion. We gather around this holy table, and Jesus reminds us that all are invited, all are welcome, all are fed: those who have been walking with God for a long time on their spiritual journey, and those who are just beginning, or beginning again; those who have been members of All Saints for decades, God bless them, and those who may have walked in our doors for the very first time, and God bless them, too.

God is not fair – thank heavens! God loves us *more* than is fair, God loves us much, much more than we deserve. That is good news. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 20A – 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Jonah 3:10 - 4:11 • Psalm 145:1-8 • Philippians 1:21-30 • Matthew 20:1-6

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