

Grace: Not What's Deserved

Jonah 3:10—4:11 Matthew 20: 1-16

As children, we grow up being taught fairness, that people should be fair to each other, just as we want people to be fair to us. But we learn some hard lessons.

We get told that you should get what you deserve, nothing more and nothing less. That gives us a sense of entitlement in certain ways. However, for children, that sense of entitlement is likely to get tempered when we run into parental discipline because what we thought we could do or say wasn't in fact our entitlement. Or it may have gotten sorted out in the schoolyard when entitlements among others clashed.

Our growing experiences yield to more mature understandings, realizing that some people don't get what they deserve; some get more, some get less. Fairness remains a priority and still guides our attitudes hopefully, but the realities of life experience teach us that fairness isn't always the outcome, no matter how desirable it may be.

I remember in third grade, I had a friend, Chris Boyle, who lived just the other side of the school fence. He was a lot of fun. But one night, his father, drunk, drove through an intersection at high speed, crashing the car and killing himself and Chris. The mother survived the accident. It was shocking, and it let my little mind know that life wasn't always fair. Sometimes it was random in taking lives, innocent lives, and that was very hard to understand. It didn't simply happen to people you didn't know; it could happen to anyone, even your friends.

When we come to matters of faith, we expect fairness from our God. We get distressed when that fairness seems lacking, even random. What good is God if God isn't fair? This simple problem is singularly responsible for many people leaving the church and abandoning any value for faith.

All of this is to say that we're good at projecting our expectations of God onto God. This only becomes a problem when our expectations fail to match what God is all about, something that our scriptures bring forth nicely.

We turn first to the example of Jonah, the headstrong prophet who is an inflamed zit on God's posterior. Jonah's story really consists of two parts. There is the well-known part of Jonah's getting swallowed by a big fish, and then there's the lesser known part of his acting in ministry like he was supposed to do in the first place.

God had called Jonah to prophesy in Nineveh, the capital of pagan Assyria. Jonah had other ideas, and it took a big fish to get Jonah to come around to God's way of thinking. However, Jonah likely didn't take up his call with a whole lot of enthusiasm.

We can imagine that Jonah trudges through the city of Nineveh doing the minimal, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Not very inspired,

matching Jonah's indifference about the residents of Nineveh. Why should God care about these people anyway? They are Gentiles, not Jews, and pagans, not faithful. Jonah thinks the whole thing is ridiculous. In fact, he's right; it **is** ridiculous.

Yet amazingly the residents of Nineveh take Jonah's warning to heart and actually repent, declaring a fast and donning sackcloth. The king even instructs these pagan, Gentile people of Nineveh to humble themselves before Jonah's God.

This is borderline absurd, of course. However, God is impressed, has compassion on the people of Nineveh, and refrains from destroying them. This divine compassion ticks off Jonah in a big way. What gets translated in our text as *Jonah was greatly displeased and angry* actually softens the wording greatly. The word repeated here is "**evil**." It should be conveyed as: *It was **evil** to Jonah, a great **evil**.*

Then Jonah prays to God, but it is **not** a reflective prayer as the translation suggests. Rather, it is brimming with anger, and likely with sarcasm. Jonah tries to explain why he fled in the beginning, but it's said bitterly and insincerely. The words are indeed classic turns of phrase echoing scripture in many places, but Jonah uses them in a nasty, ugly rebuke of God.

Jonah concludes his prayer saying, *O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.* Jonah has really lost it. Jonah wants to die, but Jonah won't commit suicide. Rather Jonah insists that God kill him. Jonah admits that God is *slow to anger and abounding in love*, and so 'please God, kill me' is Jonah being a jerk. Jonah is taunting God, as if to say, 'Since you wouldn't kill them, then kill me and show me how you are indeed a God who should be held in awe and fear. Live up to *my* expectation for once.'

God must have a huge soft spot for Jonah given the hefty heaping of abuse that Jonah has leveled at God. God simply asks Jonah: *Have you any right to be angry?* God is still determined to teach Jonah.

Jonah ignores God's question and storms off in a huff, giving his best impression of an adolescent. If Jonah had a door to his room that he could slam in God's face, he would. Lacking that tactic, the insolent prophet pllops himself down at the edge of the city to watch it.

Why is Jonah watching the city? He expects to get his way yet and see these useless Gentiles destroyed. He builds a booth or a tent for shelter. Then God causes a vine to grow up and shade his head. Again the text could be read as the plant giving *shade for his head to ease his **evil*** – rather than "discomfort" – making it consistent with the language of the prayer.

Well, Jonah likes this shade a lot. His anger is displaced by delight; evil is supplanted with goodness. Now if God would simply destroy this city, Jonah would be appeased.

Instead, the next morning, God sends a worm to continue the lesson, destroying the plant and its shade, ending Jonah's comfort. You can see the little worm on the bulletin cover at the top of the plant. As if to ensure that Jonah is aware of the blessing of the plant's shade, God produces a hot wind and scorching sun, blistering enough to make Jonah faint. Resuming his anger and resentment, Jonah declares again that he wants to die.

God challenges Jonah again, *Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?* Seeing that Jonah had nothing to do with the vine – its living or its dying – why should Jonah be angry? Regardless, Jonah says – to the point of being just plain silly – *I am angry enough to die.*

Finally, God delivers the lesson. Being packed with Gentiles who don't know to act righteously before God, Nineveh still deserves God's concern and even compassion. And Jonah is told that Jonah's proper concern and compassion should be akin to God's for this unknowing people. It may not seem fair, and no, God has not lived up to *your* expectations. However, maybe Jonah could learn the lesson that God's grace and compassion comes even to the undeserving, like Nineveh, and like Jonah, and like us.

In Matthew, the parable of the vineyard workers seems to lack a natural sense of justice and fairness. This is different from Jonah's exaggerated childish complaints. We really share the angry feelings of those hired earlier and working far longer, feeling exploited and shortchanged. We find the lack of fairness screaming to us from this passage.

Jesus and Matthew likely use this story differently. Jesus is explaining how even latecomers gain the same salvation at the end of the age. Matthew has turned this to the circumstances in his community where Jews in the Jesus community are likely resentful about Gentiles having the same salvation as Jews, the historic people of the covenant with God. Matthew wants Jews to understand and accept the Gentiles who are coming to repentance and faith in Jesus and his new covenant. And both Matthew and Jesus want everyone to understand the crazy generosity of God's grace. It's so crazy that it seems unfair.

The boss goes out in the morning in his passenger van and hires workers for \$70 for the day (which just happens to be the same rate that substitute teachers get paid) takes the substitute teachers to his middle school and they labor in the classroom for hours. Later in the morning, and again after lunch, the principal drives out in his passenger van and hires more substitute teachers and tells them he will pay them "what is right." They're happy for the work which beats standing around getting nothing, so the substitute teachers decide to trust the principal. The principal goes out again when there was only about another hour left in the school day and hires more substitute teachers without *any* explicit promise of pay.

At day's end, the principal instructs the secretary to pay the substitute teachers. The last ones hired who only worked an hour or so get in line and collect their pay, \$70. Then the ones hired earlier who worked longer also got \$70. Even the very first ones

who got hired, who had worked the longest and hardest and dealt with the most unruly kids, and who expected to get paid more than the others – fair is fair, right? – got paid the same \$70.

Grumbling ensues that this is unfair. The principal insists to the substitute teachers first hired in the morning that they had agreed to what they would get paid. They have no complaint since the principal kept his part of the bargain. Whatever the principal pays another substitute teacher hired at another time is the principal's business, not the substitute teachers.

God's love, justice and grace are not what humans expect. At times, God's love, justice and grace may seem unjust, unrealistic, and just plain wrong. Through these stories and parables, we're expected to begin adjusting, pulling our heads out of our ... back pockets and learning something about grace, God's seemingly excessive grace in particular. The heavy adjustment for us is to set aside our common notions of what is just and fair and deserved, and free our beliefs in order to better conform with God's values.

This means reframing all of our notions of truth, forgiveness, love, and peace and many other values. We are no longer living unto ourselves, living in concert, conformity, and cooperation with the ways of the world, of the Empire. We must cease to set ourselves and our accepted ways as the measure of all things, and instead take up the quite radical way of faithfulness to the truth in God and Christ.

For us, it's a reminder that our sense of fairness can be skewed to favor our own agenda, and that God's fairness is not fair. God is just, not fair, and there's a big difference. What is just may not be fair to all, but it may be what's truly best. At least, it is just from God's perspective, and that's what really matters.

If we're being faithful, we'll realize that this God who lets us down on our expectations, who rewards the undeserving, and who seems not to be doing a good job of making us comfortable or happy, is actually teaching us. May we have the faithful spirit to learn and come to better understand the Kingdom promise and its gift of new life.