

Lectionary A September 21, 2014 Pentecost 15  
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana  
Jonah 3:10-4:11  
Psalm 145:1-8  
Philippians 1:21-30  
Matthew 20:1-16

### **Thank God Life Isn't Fair!**

Life isn't always fair." That's what I remember hear my mother say from time to time when I was growing up. It would come when my sister and I (we are only eighteen months apart) would say our famous phrase, "That's not fair." Like when one of us got new shoes and the other had to wait. "She needed them worse than you. Your turn will come."

Later when we became teenagers, I, being the oldest, blazed the trail when it came to establishing rules about curfews and dates and what age to start wearing make-up. "That's no fair." My sister would say, when I finally got permission to do one of those things. Mom's answer, "She's older than you." Or I would say, "That's not fair! I got grounded when I was her age for coming home after 11:00 and she came home at 11:05. You didn't ground her!" Mom's answer, "Life's not always fair."

Oh! Jonah, in our Old Testament story was having the same kind of arguments with God. Jonah had just been through a traumatic time in his life, getting swallowed by a fish and then vomited up and spit out on the shore. Then he reluctantly carried out the job God wanted him to do, "*Up on your feet and on your way to the big city of Nineveh! Preach to them. They're in a bad way and I can't ignore it any longer.*" Those "Ninevillians" were bad people, sinners big time. Jonah really didn't want to go preach to them, so when he did, his sermon was very short and to the point. "*In forty days Nineveh will be smashed.*" Jonah's little sermon is known by some as the shortest sermon in the Bible. He was probably thinking, "If God made me get swallowed by a fish because I ran away, just think what God will do to them!"

He expected to get booted out of the city, but those crazy people actually listened to him! The king ordered the whole city, people and animals included to dress in sackcloth and fast, not even tasting any food or water. He ordered, "... *cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.*"

This isn't what Jonah wanted. He really hoped this wouldn't make any difference with God. But in the back of his mind, was probably worried. He ran up on a nearby hill to get a good view of God smashing the city to bits. But that didn't happen. Jonah was enraged. "*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.*” He wanted to see those wicked people from Nineveh get their comings. It’s not fair!

Then Jesus tells this parable in our Gospel text from Matthew. I’ve always tended to read this story as a way Jesus was teaching us to step back and be “second” Like that slogan we hear people saying today. “I am second.” The “first shall be last, “ thing. But I don’t think it’s about that at all.

This story isn’t about the workers or how much work they did, it’s really about God and God’s generosity. And like Jesus’ parables, this one was edgy enough to make the people he was talking to, stand up and listen. First of all, let’s go to that vineyard scene. All these workers are waiting, not just to make a little pocket change. Their families’ lives depended on them getting to work and making a fair day’s wage. Then look who comes to select the workers—the landowner! That didn’t happen. The landowner never picked the workers; he had a manager to do that, while he was playing golf or whatever they did back then. But in Jesus’ story, it was the landowner doing the picking.

So, thinking in the mindset of the characters in the story, I wonder what went through the minds of the ones that got left in the dust, while their colleagues went to work. I imagine desperation started to set in. “What am I going to do? How am I going to feed my children?” They stayed. Who knows maybe more workers will be needed. And more were needed, three more times, at 9 and noon and finally at 3pm. The day was almost over. I wonder why those last guys who weren’t picked all day stayed after the 3’oclock shift was selected? Shame? Or maybe they were just plain stunned and didn’t want to go home and face the family as a failure. Then the unthinkable happened. The landowner came back a fourth time and this time they were called to work. Maybe not all’s lost! They surely didn’t expect a full day’s wage, but maybe they could get by now.

Can you imagine how these last chosen workers felt when they were given a full day’s wage! Wow! Can you hear them jump for joy, running home to their families, relieved and very grateful?

Now, let’s put ourselves in the place of those who had been called to work at the beginning of the day. Grateful for employment, they had labored all day because they had to put food on the table. At the end of their shift, they lined up to receive their wage. And when word travels down the line that those hired at the end of the day received a full day’s wage, their own moment of wonder probably turned to anticipation as they calculated what that meant for them. It seem ed reasonable, don’t you think, that if people who had worked only one hour received a full day’s wage, then those who worked all day would receive much more? But that’s not what happened. When the manager gave them the same payment: a day’s wage, they had to be devastated. This must have seemed so unfair – they had, after all, worked literally ten times longer than those other workers. And so resentment instead of gratitude simmered in their veins.. And the nerve of this landowner! He protested that he actually *had* treated them fairly, paying exactly what he

had promised, and wondered why they were so upset. “... *are you envious because I am generous?*”

Jonah and the workers didn't understand God's generosity, and that shouldn't surprise us, because neither do we. And that's the key to the whole lesson we are being taught today. The first sentence of the Gospel says it all. "*For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard.*" Did you hear? "The kingdom of heaven." We are talking about heaven, not here in our life on earth. Jesus is telling us what heaven is like. There is no counting, no keeping time, there are "no haves and have nots." Heaven isn't fair.

Does Jesus mean for us to be like the landowner all the time? No. We are human. Jesus knows we have to count. And besides there has to be justice here on earth. There are those who don't have what they need and we are called to count and try to even the playing ground. That's our call, to look out for the marginalized, the poor, the mistreated and strive to make things "fair." But God wants us see that there is something even greater than justice. Something more wonderful to live for. That is love.

The landowner, who, by the way, symbolizes God, acted not with justice in mind but rather with love expressed through generosity. And here on earth, when these two – justice and love – clash, it can get ugly. Because where justice counts, love loses track. Where justice calculates, love lets go. Where justice holds all things in the balance, love and generosity give everything away, upsetting the balances we strive to maintain.

So, do we leave today asking ourselves if we choose justice or love? We want to live out of love. But, truth be told, that's hard, darn hard, as we seem almost hardwired to count our hurts and disappointments rather than our blessings. We are quick to point out what isn't fair.

The question should be which one God chooses. Because that's why Jesus tells this parable. The primary actor in this story keeps sending for workers all day long until everyone has secured employment. He pays generously. He takes the time to answer the indignant laborers. He always chooses love over justice.

We know God cares about justice. The law, prophets, and Jesus' own life and ministry testify to that. But in the end, justice can only make things better. It's love that saves, and so when forced to choose – between exercising God's just judgment against us or forgiving and accepting us in love – God in Jesus and his cross and resurrection chooses love. If we are totally honest, we realize that we are in the last group chosen, those who have no good reason to expect such lavish, even reckless generosity. It is God who looks at us in love and therefore overlooks all those places we fall short and chooses to treat us with undeserved grace, mercy, and generosity.

In our prayers today, let's think about God's choice of love and pray for glimpses of God's overflowing generosity. Let's use the words of our Psalm in rejoicing, "*The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*" And thank God everyday for not being fair. Amen.