

GRUMBLING OR GRATEFUL?

JONAH 3:10-4:11; MATTHEW 20:1-16

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Many of you know that last week our family moved into a new home. This has been very exciting and we are thrilled to have a bigger space for our family.

But there are still little things to finish inside and outside of the house, which means that every morning there are workers at our house at 8 am. One of these workers just happens to be a friend of mine—a guy I play hockey with.

Most of the guys on my hockey team are not particularly religious and are fairly rough and tumble customers. They think I am a bit of a strange creature as a “pastor.” They aren’t quite sure how to fit me into their categories.

So I’m talking to my teammate on my day off on Monday as I’m helping him put some siding on our roof, and he says, “so are you like a priest or something? What do you *do* anyway?”

I explained to him that I planned worship services, prepared sermons, that I visited with people and read books and prayed, that I did a fair bit of writing.

I said that I also did weddings and funerals occasionally. Our talk turned to the recent funeral of the little girl in Coaldale.

*Did you do **that** one?* he asked. He knew the family a little bit and had heard of the girl’s tragic death. After indicating that I did, he turned very somber. *Man*, he said. *A little girl... That’s just not fair.*

That’s just not fair.

What an interesting comment. Whether we are “religious” or not, most of us have a sense that life ought to proceed according to certain standards of justice and fairness, don’t we?

And yet we know that life *isn't* fair. A quick glance at our newspapers, our communities, our families, and our own lives is enough to make this obvious. Bad things happen to good people, good things happen to bad people. Often the distribution of suffering and blessing in our world can seem almost *totally* random.

And yet, this implicit expectation persists in us. We expect life to be fair, we hope for it, we even *demand* it from God.

Our texts today deal with the question of fairness.

Our OT text from Jonah today is pure comedy.

We don't tend to think of the Bible as containing humour literature. And our tendency is always to turn the words of Scripture into clean, tidy, moralistic tales. In the case of Jonah, we tend to turn the story into an object lesson about making sure that we don't disobey God. But there's a lot more going on in this little book than that!

Jonah is perhaps the most reluctant evangelist in history.

God tells him to go and preach to the city of Nineveh, an Assyrian city (thus the enemies of Israel) near what is today the city of Mosul, in Iraq), He's supposed to warn them that if they don't repent and turn from their wickedness and violence, they will be judged.

So Jonah does the logical thing and tries to run away from God ☺. He boards a ship to take him as far in the opposite direction as possible.

Then, God sends a storm, and the panicked crew reluctantly hurls Jonah into the sea to attempt to make the storm stop. The wind and the waves relent, but now poor Jonah has his own problems because a giant fish has swallowed him whole!

In the belly of the whale, Jonah cries out to God and prays a very eloquent prayer, extolling the character of God and pleading for deliverance.

So, the fish spits Jonah out on to dry land and Jonah gets a second chance to go and preach to Nineveh.

You would think that Jonah would be overflowing with gratitude at the mercy he had received and eager to seize his second chance to obey God's command.

You would, alas, think wrong ☺.

Jonah goes to Nineveh, but preaches quite possibly one of the shortest and most grudging sermons ever: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

You almost get the sense that Jonah is *trying* to fail as a prophet—that he’s getting his assignment from God over with as quickly and inadequately as possible so that he can gleefully watch God smite his enemies!

But amazingly, the Ninevites repent! The king declares a fast and all the people turn from their evil and violence. And God spares them.

And what does Jonah do? What does the Jonah who had been rescued from his own folly by the mercy of God do? Does he celebrate the triumph of mercy and redemption over human wickedness? Does he rejoice at the salvation of a city full of God’s children?

Um, no. Not exactly.

What Jonah *in fact* does is stomp off in to the corner to sulk.

I knew it! he says. *I knew that you were such a miserably merciful God and that you would—of course!—have compassion upon these wretched enemies of mine! IT’S NOT FAIR!!*

Jonah is so upset that God has shown mercy to his enemies that he says he would rather die than live (Jonah 3:3). He tramps up the hill overlooking Nineveh and marines in his anger.

If all this weren’t comical enough, God provides a little object lesson for Jonah.

First, he provides a plant to give Jonah a bit of shade from the sun. Then, he sends a worm to eat the plant followed by searing heat and wind.

This is too much for poor Jonah. Not only does he have to deal with the unfairness of his enemies being spared when he was so looking forward to their destruction, now his plant is gone!!

Again, he wants to die.

God asks, *Is it right for you to be angry about this plant?*

Yes! Jonah says, yes it is! Angry enough to die!!

And God asks, How can you be concerned about this little plant that you did nothing to bring into existence and was only here for a day, but not about the city of Nineveh, full of human beings that I made and care about?

And the story ends. We don't hear a thing about Jonah's response. We are left with the image of Jonah, pouting on the hill because God was too generous with those that he didn't feel deserved it.

Because God wasn't fair.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard also deals with the question of whether or not God is fair.

God is, obviously, the landowner. And the workers in this story? Who are they?

Well, in Matthew the series of teachings of which this parable is a part are all told within earshot of the Pharisees. So it's reasonable to conclude that Jesus was offering a commentary on their notions of who deserved what in God's economy.

Who had labored the longest for God, after all, but the guarders and interpreters of Israel's Scriptures?

And who grumbled most frequently about the unsavoury character and reputation of those Jesus was welcoming "later in the day" than the Pharisees?

If we read this parable alongside the more famous parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15, we could say that together these two stories paint an unflattering picture of the religious elites of Israel.

They were the longsuffering workers in the vineyard. *They* were the older son who dutifully stayed on his father's farm.

And they were the ones grumbling about how all the riffraff were now being allowed in!

We've been with you all this time. We've borne the heat of the day. We didn't squander all your money. We didn't show up close to quitting time. We are your loyal servants!! We deserve better than those lazy, sinful people! IT'S NOT FAIR!!

And what does the landowner (God) say?

13 “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? **14** Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. **15** Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

And now we come to the heart of the matter, don't we?

This is the question that animates both the parable of the workers and the story of Jonah.

Are you envious because I am generous?

This is the question that is asked of us, too. Are there times when we, too, grumble that God is too generous with those around us?

Why do those people who clearly don't take their faith as seriously as we seem to have everything go their way?

I've served in the church all these years—why don't I get my way more often while latecomers get to run the show?!

*Why does **that** church seem to prosper when their theology is **clearly** deficient?*

Why did so-and-so get a well-paying job at the first interview while I still languish underemployed?

Why did our friends get pregnant right away and we still can't conceive?

I've lived my whole life trying to be a good Christian... Why did my spouse die? Why has my kid's life gone off the rails?

I've taken care of myself my whole life and now I'm sick while my friend is healthy as a horse despite never giving a second thought to her health!

Why do things seem so much easier for my neighbour and everything comes hard for me?

IT'S NOT FAIR!

I've grumbled along these lines. Perhaps you have, too.

But in my better moments I try to ask myself *why* I am lamenting the unfairness of life and/or God.

Is it because I am genuinely grieving for/hurting with those who so often find themselves at the bottom of the pile? Sometimes.

But often it is simply because I am envious at the generosity of God. And envy is a dangerous thing.

Listen to what Cara Joyner says in a recent article about envy in *Relevant* magazine:

Envy infects and decays... like an infectious disease.

As with anything that opposes life, it is deceitful. It keeps us staring at others, resenting our apparent weaknesses, but meanwhile, it is literally boring a hole into our own strengths, ripping apart the meaningful stories we were created for.¹

God knows this very well. And so do we, if we pay attention, if we're honest. We know that if we give envy free reign, it destroys us, it hollows us out.

Envy keeps our eyes on the score, on who is getting what (and who is not!), rather than upon the gifts that we *have* received, and upon the God who has given them.

Envy is incapable of celebrating when others receive good gifts because it can't stop thinking about what it didn't receive.

Envy sees *everything* in life through the very narrow lens of *me* and my experience.

Envy cannot tolerate a God who gives unpredictably and abundantly.

¹ <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/problem-with-purpose-envy>

In the parable, the landowner gives every worker exactly what was promised. Nobody gets less than they were owed. All get their fair wages. The “problem” is that some get more. This is what we find so difficult to accept.

Until we stop to think about what, actually, we are *owed* by God. The answer is, of course, *nothing*. At the end of the day, life and salvation are gifts that we do nothing to earn. All is grace.

Salvation is *never* described in Scripture as something we are owed as a fair payment for services rendered. To quote commentator Richard Gardner, “Eternal life is finally a *gift from God*, not a *claim on God*.”²

This is the lesson we are to learn from the story of Jonah and the parable of the workers in the vineyard.

We do not live in a world where blessings and suffering are carefully calculated and distributed according to our character and virtue. We might wish that we did (or think that we do!), but the truth is that we live in a world much more unpredictable, terrifying, glorious, beautiful and hopeful than that!

This week, I read a book by Jerry Sittser called *A Grace Disguised*. He wrote the book after losing his wife, his mother, and his young daughter in a car crash with a drunk driver. If anyone would have a reason to question the fairness of life and the fairness of God, it would be this man.

And he does. In the book, he wrestles, he laments, he agonizes, he rages at God, but in the end he comes to some very important conclusions. Life is not fair. God isn't even fair. And we should be *thankful for this!*

I close with his words:

God spare us a life of fairness! To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. **A fair world may make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We may get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied.** A world with grace will give us more than we deserve.³

² Richard Gardner, *Matthew: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1991), 297.

May God help us to be people who are grateful for gifts received rather than who grumble at the wild and unpredictable generosity of God.

And may God help us to *ourselves* become people of generosity, grace, and truth, in imitation of our generous God.

Amen.



³ Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss, Expanded Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 130.