

God Isn't Fair (Thank God)

Jonah 3:10-4:11; Philippians 1:21-30

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

September 20, 2020/16th Sunday After Pentecost

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer well known for her 2006 novel *Half a Yellow Sun* and others. She's also famous for her wildly popular 2009 TED Talk called, "The Danger of a Single Story" (which I highly recommend).

Her father died suddenly on June 10 of this year. Last week, she published an article for the *New Yorker* called "Notes on Grief" which is based on the experience of losing her father and, more particularly, losing her father during this year of all years.

Because of the pandemic, she was not able to be with him when he died. She was stuck in America when her father died in Nigeria. Because of the pandemic, she has had to grieve with her family remotely, through computer screens and phones. Because of the pandemic, they have still been unable to bury him properly even months later.

I want to begin my sermon on suffering and the fairness of God by reading a passage from her article:

Messages pour in, and I look at them as through a mist. Who is this message for? "On the loss of your father," one says. Whose father? My sister forwards a message from her friend, saying that my father was humble despite his accomplishments. My fingers start to tremble, and I push my phone away. He *was* not. He *is*.

There is a video of people trooping into our house... to give condolences, and I want to reach in and wrench them away from our living room, where already my mother is settled on the sofa in placid widow pose.

A table is in front of her like a barrier, to maintain social distance. Already friends and relatives are saying that this must be done and that must be done. A condolence register must be placed by the front door, and my sister goes off to buy a bolt of white

lace to cover the table, and my brother buys a hardcover notebook, and already people are bending to write in the book. I think, Go home! Why are you coming to our house to write in that alien notebook? How dare you make this thing true? Somehow, these well-wishers have become complicit.

I feel myself breathing air that is bittersweet with my own conspiracies. Needle pricks of resentment flood through me at the thought of people who are more than eighty-eight years old, older than my father and alive and well.

My anger scares me, my fear scares me, and somewhere in there is shame, too—why am I so enraged and so scared? I am afraid of going to bed and of waking up, afraid of tomorrow and all the tomorrows after. I am filled with disbelieving astonishment that the mailman comes as usual and people are inviting me to speak somewhere and regular news alerts appear on my phone screen.

How is it that the world keeps going, breathing in and out unchanged, while in my soul there is a permanent scattering?¹

What a beautifully written and heartbreaking passage! I suspect anyone who has lost someone close them can resonate with her description of the devastation and disorientation that death leaves in its wake.

What also comes through loud and clear in her words is a howl of protest at the unfairness of it all. *How can life go on as normal? How can you speak of my father in the past tense already? How can the mailman show up? How can people older than my dad still be alive while he's not? It's not fair!*

Even though her dad was approaching ninety, even though he had a full and long life full of happy memories, even though the family was close and warm with one another, even though his death wasn't a long, protracted affair, as so many sadly are, her protest remains. *It's not fair.*

No matter whether we claim to believe in God or not, whether we call ourselves “religious” or not (and Adichie seems to have a somewhat complicated relationship with her Catholic upbringing), we all have a deep sense that life ought to be fair, no matter how much evidence we see to the contrary.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/notes-on-grief?fbclid=IwAR3yQYL5uRdhJDuYJYN592ah0zaM6BDs6q-7HSq1EI48iuTVt3ren0i5L8E>

Wherever you find the complaint, “Life isn’t fair,” you can be sure that “God isn’t fair” isn’t too far behind it. God is, after all, the *author* of life, right? Who else would we blame for life’s unfairness?

Many Christians bristle at this suggestion. It seems sacrilegious, somehow. God is good and loving, after all, so God must be fair.

But *is* God fair? It’s a question worth thinking about.

Even a quick glance at Scripture would seem to yield the conclusion that whatever else God might be, “fair” wouldn’t be at the top of the list.

The book of Job immediately leaps to mind. Job does nothing wrong and yet God allows him to suffer horrendously, which sort of *seems* unfair.

In the New Testament, the obvious text about fairness is the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1-16 (one of our readings this morning that wasn’t read).

The story is well-known. A group of workers agree to work for a certain landowner for an agreed upon wage and, throughout the day, others are hired for the same wage to work only for the portion of the day that remains. The worker who begins near the end of the day gets paid the same as the one who began first thing in the morning. Understandably, this leads to some grumbling from those who worked the whole day. “It’s not fair!”

And, the landowner’s response? Well, he doesn’t re-calibrate the wages so that everything is proportionate to time invested. He chastises them for being envious. “Don’t I have the right to be generous?” he says. “Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?”

I suspect Jesus’ parable wouldn’t get much traction in an elementary school playground. It would probably fare even worse in a university classroom!

But one of my favourite stories in all of Scripture about the unfairness of God is the story of Jonah.

Jonah is probably 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). 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.

Not a great move, as it turns out. God sends a storm, and the panicked crew reluctantly hurls Jonah into the sea to attempt to make the storm stop.

Incredibly, 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 fish, 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." He didn't even warm them up with a joke!

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 incompetently 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.

What does Jonah, who has 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?

Well, 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.

In the case of Jonah, God's unfairness went in the direction of mercy. Jonah had eagerly desired to have a front-row seat to watch his enemies get exactly what they deserved (in his view), to see the "fairness" of God in action.

But God didn't act according to the fairness script. Mercy triumphed over judgment. And this annoyed Jonah greatly.

There is a lesson here for us, certainly, for we, too, are often quite eager for justice and fairness to be dispensed to those who we think deserve it (usually our enemies).

It's so easy for us to allow judgment to triumph over mercy, isn't it? This seems particularly true in our culture where so many people rush to judge and condemn, often based on only part of the story. We are so eager to blame and shame. We are so easily inflamed by a social media machine that is designed to generate and feed off outrage and animosity.

Jonah pouting under his tree could well be a symbol for any of us who take pleasure in the downfall of our enemies and are more preoccupied with our own conceptions of justice and fairness than God's unfair grace and mercy.

But the problem of life's unfairness in the other direction remains. It's one thing to point to a story like Jonah's and be reminded that for God, mercy is more important than everyone getting precisely what's fair.

But of course, that doesn't really address the problem of unfair suffering. We sometimes struggle with unfair mercy, but only when it goes to those who we would prefer to bypass. We're always quite happy to be on the *receiving* end of this mercy.

But unmerited suffering is quite another thing. And this is where we come to Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.

Paul is writing from a prison cell. He is suffering unjustly. And he is writing to a church familiar with being mistreated, enduring opposition and persecution for their faith.

He's writing *as* a person who has been treated unfairly to a people who are *presently* being treated unfairly.

What does Paul tell the church? *Stand up for your rights! Demand justice! Fight back!* No.

He says something very strange, counterintuitive, even frightening. He says, "It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29).

Jesus Christ is, of course, the ultimate example of one who was treated unfairly, who suffered grotesque and violent punishment despite being the very embodiment of peace and righteousness.

If anyone had good cause to protest, “It’s not fair!” it would be Jesus. And yet, as we saw last week, that’s not what he says, as he hangs on Calvary’s cross. Instead, his dying words are, “Forgive them. They don’t know what they’re doing.”

This isn’t fairness in action. It’s mercy.

In a mysterious way, unfair suffering puts us in touch with the very heart of God.

I don’t say this casually in any way. I know how deeply painful suffering is. I know that some people in this room and watching online have endured unspeakable tragedy and devastating loss. I know some have watched or are watching their children suffer, which is harder still. Most of us would gladly take on pain if it would spare our kids!

But we are here dealing with one of the deepest and most hopeful mysteries of the Christian faith.

We worship a God who, in Christ, suffered as an expression of forgiveness for sinful humanity, and to heal a wounded creation. We worship a God who, in Christ, groans alongside us now as we anticipate the kingdom come in fullness.

When it comes to suffering and the fairness of God, the Christian message is that no, God is not fair. And we should be thankful for that.

God is, as Jonah complained, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is, as Jesus demonstrated, willing to suffer unjustly for love’s sake.

This does not magically make the difficulties of life’s unfairness disappear. Life is still hard. Suffering still hurts. But knowing who God is and how God loves gives us comfort and hope.

It also gives us an example to follow. As imitators of God, we, too, are to be eager to extend undeserved mercy. We, too, are to locate our sufferings within the suffering of Christ.

And we do this in the sure and confident hope that God’s mercy and justice will one day overwhelm, transform, heal, and redeem all of the ugliness and unfairness that our world has ever seen.

This is the Christian hope—not that one day all the math will work out, that the scales will be meticulously balanced, and everyone will get the same thing, but that the just and merciful and perfect love of God will have the last word on every human story and the story of the entire cosmos.

This is good news. This is our hope. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

