

Mat 20: 1-16 (...and Jonah end)

Life's just not fair is it? I work really hard and I deserve all that I have...and I want the same opportunities for me and my family that everyone else has! It's my right!

Fairness is something that we in America care a great deal about. We go through great lengths to ensure fairness in our communities, our schools, our families... and that's a good thing...to strive and treat one another fairly and with respect.

Yet from God's perspective, as is usually the case, things look a lot different. So is it really fair that most of us were born here in America and that we assume access to food, shelter and water that the rest of the world really doesn't take for granted. Is it fair that some of us are born healthy? Is it fair that most folks are born into areas of the world where disease, famine and death are common? Being born here in America means you can live to the average age of 75 but in Cameroon or Afghanistan you can expect to live to the ripe old age of 18 years old...let that sink in a bit...Is that fair? Is it fair that we are all born different, and to different circumstances, and in different places?

Conversely what richness of life would there be if we were all born exactly the same? What if everything was one color, one flavor? Do you think God sees the dividing lines we have drawn all over our maps all over God's planet?

Now in the Early Church, they also struggled with their identity and fairness...so if you were a Jewish Christian could you impose your traditions and restrictions on those new gentile Christians...otherwise why could they eat bacon when you couldn't...Now that's not fair?

How far can we go when fairness is even an affront to our sensibilities as Human beings? When do we say God's outta line here? Well it's pretty clear that God's view of creation is a lot different than our own.

Enter Jonah! So here is one of my favorite stories and it's absurd from beginning to end...It's a satire! And sometimes to get those in power to look at themselves in the mirror it's easier to use humor. Now the author of this little story thought to reveal something about the nature of God and God's sense of fairness just like Jesus' parable did today.

So God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, he then gets on a ship bound for Tarshish...the only problem is that Tarshish is in the exact opposite direction! So "the prophet of God" drops what he is doing and goes in the exact opposite direction. Why?

Well... Nineveh was a major city in the Assyrian empire, and the Assyrians totally wiped the 10 Northern tribes of Israel off the map. The Assyrians carried away thousands and killed or resettled them. In fact, Samaritans were of half-blooded Jewish and Assyrian descent and were hated in Jesus' day still for their ancestors not wanting to die instead of being taken by their captors.

The Assyrians were a ferocious warrior nation synonymous with cruelty and atrocity. They flayed their prisoners alive to inspire terror and there are records of Assyrians displaying mounds of human skulls to inspire fear in collecting tribute from their neighbors.

So God asks Jonah to go to Israel's most feared and hated enemy and bring them God's warning so that they too may earn God's grace and favor...UH... REALLY? I don't think so – off to Tarshish!

Now on the ship the heathen sailors pray to Jonah's God and the prophet does not! Everything in the story is backwards for God's own prophet. So Jonah gets swallowed up in a big fish and remains in darkness three days before being spewed out onto the shore!

Then God says now are you ready to go to Nineveh?!...So Jonah reluctantly complies with God and does the very minimum...he barely steps foot into the city and makes a single statement "forty days more

and Nineveh shall be overthrown” with no effort whatsoever he leaves...malicious compliance.

And the irony is that based on Jonah’s one statement the entire city changes its’ ways overnight. Even the animals wore sackcloth (which was animal skin) so even the animals, wearing animal skins, repented. Jonah was the most successful prophet ever! Converting 120K barbarians AND even their animals with one statement!

Now this really pisses Jonah off! God spared the hated and brutal Assyrians! This was certainly NOT fair...and he gets so angry with God that he wants to die! Could you imagine God just forgiving all these people? Jonah wanted Nineveh destroyed! Where’s God’s justice?!

And Jonah gives us a hint: he says he knew God’s love and mercy trumped God’s anger and judgment. This was told tongue in cheek to the Hebrews then to give them a glimpse of the nature of God.

But there’s some serious stuff here. Whose side is God on...really!? Imagine a devout Jewish rabbi being sent by God in the middle of WW2 to Germany to proclaim God’s word for them to repent while the Jews and the rest of the world cry out for God’s vengeance and justice! Then imagine this guy setting foot into the German countryside just over the border whispering repent and then leaving.

Word reaches Hitler and the entire country repents overnight. Would the world and the Jewish people offer them love and mercy? Are you getting how radical this stuff is for us to handle. It goes against our sensibilities of what is fair. We teach our kids fairness, not kindness and love, in the face of unfairness. We teach our kids to work hard and they’ll be successful.

In the picture of our lives here on earth this all makes good sense to us. But from God’s point of view the issue of fairness doesn’t even exist... God’s love and mercy literally knows no bounds and when given a

choice between love and forgiveness and fairness and justice we see how God chooses...

What's our usual response to transgression and violence...love and mercy... or just more transgression and violence? This is hard for us to swallow and Jonah had to be literally swallowed himself to do God's will! In this country we love to wage war on things...the war on terrorism, the war on drugs, the war on oppression...honestly, have any of these wars ever fixed anything? Instead the cycle must be broken!

There's a saying that only light can chase away darkness and only love can rid the world of hate. God knows something that we have trouble getting. And in today's gospel story we have the Parable of the Landowner...once again revealing to us God's nature!

This parable is about our view of transaction. Those that work the hardest are the most successful... or do they?! See the kingdom of man mentality is rooted in scarcity! There's not enough, so we have to fight for our little piece of the pie! But the kingdom of God reveals itself from a place of abundance, just the opposite! And for many of us this may seem upside down...there's plenty for all is shared!

The grace of the landowner is not what we would expect. Hard work + reward! And those who usually have more status, wealth, fame etc. tend to have to worked really hard to maintain that status quo...welcome to the rat race!

In this world - the grasping and clinging and ranking and comparing never stops. And playing this game in the kingdom of man... is... always EXHAUSTING! In the kingdom of heaven this game doesn't exist!

In the parable a landowner who needs workers goes into town several times to hire them. The last group are the five o'clockers...still there at the end of the day...the folks no one wanted to hire...they're the B-Team...Remember in the school yard...the kids who never got picked...

But this landowner eventually invites everyone in and pays them all the same out of His unending generosity and abundance to everyone.

How do you NOT have enough love, or peace or grace...the things that really matter to us. And the five o'clockers, the losers, the late, the messed up, are also included as well...in fact He pays them first!

Now I guess the others were thinking, wow they got a full day's pay... Imagine what we're gonna get! ...the ones who worked the hardest and the longest...and then he pays them the same! EXCUSE ME! This isn't fair...we did everything right...so we deserve more...we are entitled!

Well how do you get more grace, more love, more peace. It's usually the opposite, isn't it!? The ones that usually get God first ARE the 5 o'clockers, those left behind...see God doesn't play our game. The kingdom of God works differently!

And those who were paid last were angry and resentful. You have made the 5 o'clockers EQUAL to us hard workers."

Now by addressing these workers as "Friend" the landowner is not being kind! The Greek word here is used only two other times in the entire New Testament: in the Parable of the Wedding Banquet and the other when Jesus addresses Judas at the moment of his betrayal... It is used as a rebuke to someone who is OPPOSED to the will of God. People who play the game! The deserving! The self-righteous!

The angry, entitled laborers were more concerned about what they considered fair and what they had earned by their own actions. The resentful laborers felt they were more entitled than those who had only worked for an hour and were furious with the idea of being viewed as equal to THOSE people.

We all want fairness don't we? We all want fairness... until we don't. We all want fairness when it comes to others...but when we mess up well then we want a break...we want grace!

Are you envious of my being generous...See in the eyes of God we are all in need of grace; no one child is better than another. What's seems "NOT FAIR" to us is GOD in fact treating everyone fairly...

Think about how you treat your own children...does the one who looks better or does better earn more of your love and attention than your other children? In fact, isn't it when your child does screws up that that child needs love and grace right then!

In the kingdom of heaven, God's grace, and love, and mercy, and peace supersedes all scrambling to be first, all entitlement, all self-worth!

Look in a mirror... and instead of looking at your own accomplishments try instead looking at "What were the greatest failures in my life and how did I experience God's grace then?" That's when you'll see how God's love and grace showed up in your life.

And the church is should never be a place for those who have it all together and have earned the right to be here, instead it is a fellowship of 5 o'clockers... and that's certainly true for me...that's probably why I get it!

Jesus proclaims that ALL of this precious life is a gift. None of it is earned...it is ALL freely and unconditionally given! There's not a need to strive, cling, and grasp to obtain something that we have had... the... whole... time!

This challenging Parable once again reveals the good news, that God graciously extends grace, love, mercy, and peace to all of God's children ...especially during those times that we need it the most!

And don't confuse fairness with injustice! God's fairness is never about treating someone better than another. God's fairness runs deeper and is NOT rooted in the game of power and labeling and entitlement that we play.

From God's point of view, the issue of fairness takes on a different quality... God's love and mercy literally knows no bounds and when given a choice between love and forgiveness, and fairness and justice, we all know how God will choose every time to treat all God's children.

I wonder, can we resent this extremely loving God, and are we even aware of just how much God pursues and loves every one of us...even as we complain about God's generosity for others. For God, fairness is seen as loving ALL God's creations, equally, and without reservation.

Our circumstances and our DNA are a given...they were not worked for or given in fairness? The Divine is seen in the all the differences and in their connections... and this diversity allows us all to experience God through the richness, depth, and beauty of this life.

Imagine living in a world where we KNOW that God loves us... that we ALL have everything we need from the very start...and that we are all created in God's image...

God's grace, beyond our wildest imagination... and that there is nothing...nothing we can do... or need do... to earn... or deserve it.

The first shall be last and the last first. Through love this distinction really holds no meaning. God is relational and experiential... and love is the key that opens the door to the kingdom of heaven.

The grace of God, and the love of God, is for ALL people...and only through offering grace and love to one another...especially when circumstances seem unfair or are unjust...only then will we see God's love and mercy poured out abundantly into the world through us.

Only then will we truly experience the living God in our midst. Only then can we be called disciples and followers of Christ...for this is what the Kingdom of God is like!

No - the world is not fair at all...Thank God!

Your faithful servant, carmen