

**“Mercy Me!”**  
**Jonah 3:10-4:11**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells**

Anyone who has raised children or has friends with young children has almost certainly heard this particular phrase come out of the mouths of babes. “It’s not fair!” That’s because children are very observant and they become aware of different treatment between them and others very early on. This is especially true when parents mete out punishments for something their children have done wrong. If one child is punished differently or with a milder “sentence,” the other will pick up on it pretty quickly. That’s where the protest comes in: “How come Johnny got sent to his room for a day and I have to stay in my room for three? It’s not fair!”

Where does this protest over fairness come from in children so young? Those who study early childhood development have noted that a child’s sense of fair play appears in the early years.

In one recent study, child psychologists had children play a game wherein two children are given candy: one got four pieces while the other got only one. The child with four pieces was given a chance to decide whether to keep the unfair distribution (and keep those four pieces of candy), or to reject the unequal distribution, but if they rejected it, both children would get nothing.

I know, this sounds like a trick question. Of course, the one with more will keep what he or she has got, right? But that wasn’t the case. In many of the games, the child with four pieces chose to give up their candy to prevent the other child from getting “the short end of the stick.” Even if they got nothing, many of the children sacrificed their own advantage rather than see another child get less.

What does this tell us about childhood behavior? It seems to indicate that while children can be selfish a lot of the time, they also develop a basic sense of fairness that they want to see applied in real life.<sup>1</sup> Which brings us, oddly yet relatedly, to today’s scripture lesson and the story of Jonah.

Most of us are familiar with the first part of Jonah’s story, the one we learn in Sunday school about Jonah and the big fish. About how...:

- One day, God speaks to Jonah telling him to go preach to the people of Nineveh.
- But Jonah goes the other way and boards a ship headed for the farthest point from Nineveh he can think of.
- God creates a storm that lashes the ship he is on until, finally, Jonah confesses to the crew that he is the cause of their troubles, and they throw Jonah into the sea.
- Jonah was all set to drown, but God sends a great fish that swallows Jonah until Jonah prays and he is thrown up on dry land after three days, alive.
- When Jonah finally does what God asked of him, he preaches a word of repentance to Nineveh. Everyone in the city, from the king on down, and even the animals, put on sackcloth and pray for forgiveness.

And then, good news, God hears the prayers of the Ninevites and does not destroy the city. This should be cause for celebration and giving thanks. Think about it: An entire city just answered an altar call and repented of their evil ways. Everyone should be excited to hear the news about Nineveh. But not everyone is pleased. Now, if this were a reality TV show, this is the point where our camera would pan over to record Jonah’s reaction...and we would find him standing there, boiling mad, exclaiming to the highest heavens: “It’s not fair.” When God forgave Nineveh, Jonah was a very unhappy man.

“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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine McAuliffe, Peter R. Blake, Felix Warneken, “Do Kids Have a Fundamental Sense of Fairness?” Scientific American.com blog site, August 23, 2017, article online, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/do-kids-have-a-fundamental-sense-of-fairness/>, accessed 16 September 2020.

Jonah is so mad with God right now. He is like a toddler, unhappy about the injustice of seeing enemy Nineveh **NOT** get its comeuppance. He wants to see them punished, eliminated, destroyed, wiped from the face of the earth. So, what does he do now? Jonah goes off outside the city, builds himself a booth as a shady spot, sits down, and waits to see what God would do next. Jonah here is acting more like a toddler having a *hissy-fit*, which (of course) is a technical theological term for being angry with God.

Jonah might be forgiven his strong feelings about the people of Nineveh. We can understand him a bit better when we look at his backstory:

- Jonah was a prophet active during the 8<sup>th</sup> century (700s) BCE (before the birth of Christ).
- He was from a small town in the north near Galilee—in fact, his hometown of Gath-hepher was about three miles from Nazareth.
- As a resident of the border area, Jonah would know about the threat from Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire. In fact, after Jonah’s death, Assyria conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel, carting off its people to foreign lands.
- And, the Assyrians were ruthless in war.
  - o Elsewhere in the Old Testament, the prophet Nahum described Nineveh as “a city of bloodshed” filled with plunder for other nations (Nahum 3:1).
  - o Their kings boasted of their brutality: “With their blood [that is, the blood of the enemy] I dyed the mountain like crimson wool,” one of them wrote.

Nineveh was the land of Israel’s enemy. But seeing God forgive wicked Nineveh was more than Jonah could bear.

You know, it’s too bad Jonah didn’t get a chance to play the “fairness game” as a child. If he did, he might have understood the mercy God showed Nineveh if he stopped to think this through: The same mercy God showed Jonah (by saving him through the big fish) was offered to Nineveh. Jonah, who knew about God’s mercy, is offended when that same mercy is offered to his enemy.

We should be familiar with this situation because we’ve heard it before. Jesus told some stories about God’s wild and extravagant grace that was good news—great news—for those who received it, but that same grace elicited resentment from others:

- Luke told a story about the time Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem and sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village. The people there wanted nothing to do with Jesus and rejected him. When the disciples James and John, the sons of Zebedee, the sons of thunder, saw what happened, they were angry. “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” After all, they must have thought, “It’s not fair!” the way they treated you. But Jesus rebuked them. How quick we are to pass sentence and call for destroying someone for a perceived offense. (Luke 9:51-56)
- Then there is the well-loved story of the Prodigal son. Everyone loves this one because the son who went astray, comes to his senses, and returns home, a “sadder and wiser” young man, is met with unbelievable grace by his father. The father throws a party to welcome home the son who was, for all intents and purposes, dead but is now alive! Everyone loves this story...Except for the older son, the one who stayed with his father. That son resented the grace lavished on his disobedient brother. Can you hear the older brother? “It’s not fair!” How quick we are to receive the grace given to us, but complain when grace is showered on someone else. (Luke 15:11-32)

Maybe the parable that teaches us the most about God’s grace, and offends our sense of fairness, is the story of the vineyard owner and the day laborers.

- A vineyard owner goes out in the morning to hire laborers for his fields. He returns to town at mid-day and again at 5 o’clock and finds men standing around waiting to be hired. He puts them to work. At 6 o’clock, the workers finish up and come to receive their pay. The vineyard owner directs the last hired to be the first paid...and they receive a full day’s wage. When the laborers who put in a full day come by to be paid, they expect a bonus. They get the same wage as those who worked only an hour. You guessed it: “It’s not fair!”
- But as the vineyard owner explains, what’s fair is up to him. His vineyards, his money, his choice on how the workers are paid.

The Kingdom of God is just like this. The economy of God's grace is not based on our work, on our accomplishments, on our position, or anything about us. The economy of God's grace is based on God's reckless and abundant love for God's people.

Pastor Phillip Martin tells a story about his graduation from high school in North Carolina. The principal of the school forbid anyone from wearing any other than the standard issue robes and caps. No special ribbons or sashes marking academic achievement or membership in any clubs. There was no valedictorian and no salutatorian to give speeches. No one's academic or sports or other awards were mentioned. In the eyes of this principal, everyone was recognized for the same achievement: receiving a high school diploma. Everyone was valued the same.<sup>2</sup>

As in the parable, and for Jonah, the same is true of God's kingdom. God's kingdom, God's grace, God's choice on who and how to lavish God's grace. No person is more or less worthy of salvation. God has a preference for those whom society does not value, the ones who are chosen last, the people with little or no sense of self-worth.

As we think about old Jonah, still stewing in his "hissy-fit," we ought to ask ourselves the questions:

- Where are the Nineveh's in our lives?
- Who are the people we want to "call down fire from heaven" upon; and, is that what Jesus would want?"
- And, are we so quick to complain about the unfairness of God in handing out grace without seeing it as the same "amazing grace" that saved us?

We can be grateful that in God's "fairness game," God calls us all. The least and the last come first. And the generous, magnanimous, abundant grace of God is given freely to all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Phillip Martin, "Not My Favorite Parable," Ministry Matters, September 16, 2020, video on internet, [https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10492/not-my-favorite-parable?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Not%20my%20favorite%20parable%20&utm\\_campaign=MM%20Newsletter%2009-16-20](https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10492/not-my-favorite-parable?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Not%20my%20favorite%20parable%20&utm_campaign=MM%20Newsletter%2009-16-20), accessed 17 September 2020.