

“A Fishy Justice”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Matthew 20:1-16

Both our scriptures today speak of fairness. In Jonah, we hear of Jonah’s expectation of God’s fairness in judging Nineveh. In Matthew, we confront our desire that others not receive gifts equal to what we have earned, if they have not earned them.

My fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Boemig, had a large, framed, Olan Mills Studio picture of her husband, Mr. Boemig, sitting on her front desk. Whenever one of us, her students, would complain about something in class, Mrs. Boemig would wave her hand over to her husband’s bald, grinning image, and tell us, “Life’s not fair, or Mr. Boemig would have hair.” These were the days before baldness was a hip expression of masculinity, and clearly Mr. Boemig-- or perhaps, moreso, his wife-- lamented the fact that he did not have a full head of hair.

We found that year that there were more injustices in life than Mr. Boemig’s bald head and too much homework, or even the classroom pet gerbil eating her young. Fourth Grade was the year we watched eagerly from our classroom one morning as a crew of astronauts climbed aboard the Space Shuttle Challenger. Christa McAuliffe, a schoolteacher, was part of that crew, and we students felt an affinity with her, as if she was lifting us into space with her. 73 seconds after takeoff, the shuttle fell apart, hurling the *Challenger* and its occupants into the atmosphere and to their death. *Life’s not fair...* I was thankful for having Mrs. Boemig to shepherd me through the dissonance between what was expected, and what really happened.

For Jonah, there was also dissonance: between what he expected of God’s justice, and the surprise of God’s mercy. Jonah was sent to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians-- these were the people who had not only captured and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel; they also conquered Jerusalem in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, where Jonah was from, and made them a vassal state. You must understand that Jonah belonged to a group of prophets, and all of them proclaimed Nineveh’s and Assyria’s destruction: Nahum, Isaiah, and Zephaniah all proclaimed Nineveh’s destruction under God’s judgment, with no case for its redemption. As for Jonah, he was so completely disgusted by Nineveh that he did not even want to do them the honor of warning them of the doom that would come upon them. Instead of heading East to Nineveh, as God had called, Jonah headed West for the sea.

At God’s command, the sea tossed and turned, causing the sailors on it to cast lots to find out who had angered their god so badly as to cause this storm. Jonah’s cowardice before his God was revealed, and so the sailors threw him into the water, to quiet the storm. But the Lord provided Jonah with a large fish that swallowed him whole! Jonah stayed for 3 days in the belly of that fish, in prayer, until that fish spewed Jonah out onto dry land.

This time, Jonah did as God commanded. I might add, Jonah preached what may sound like the worst sermon ever: "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!" Jonah proclaimed. Wow! It just goes to show that God can take any measly sermon and do something wonderful with it. The people of Nineveh were so filled with remorse, that they changed their evil ways. The king commanded that all fast, wear sackcloth and ashes, and cry mightily to God in a spirit of repentance. Even the livestock had to wear sackcloth!

The book said that God saw all this, and so God changed God's mind about the calamity God proclaimed, and God did not do it. In love and mercy, God forgave them.

This is the part Jonah has the most trouble with. What? No fire and brimstone? No smiting? Not even a few plagues? "I knew you were a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishment." And that is why Jonah ran from God. He didn't want to see his enemies get that treatment. Jonah tells God, "please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." Maybe he was embarrassed to return to Judah only to tell them that God had redeemed their worst enemy, thanks to *his* crummy little sermon.

But God does some work on Jonah. Causing a bush to grow over Jonah's head, shading Jonah from the sun and saving him from discomfort, God gives Jonah an unexpected gift, and Jonah relaxes from his anger, and even feels great happiness. But then, God sent a worm to attach the bush, and the bush withered up and died. The sultry east wind, combined with the sun beating down, made Jonah faint; he believed he would die, saying, "It is better for me to die than to live." Somehow, Jonah gained a sense of entitlement from the bush that hadn't even been there the day before, to the point he just cannot live without it.

Then God points out the irony that Jonah is concerned for a *bush* that Jonah hadn't worked for, and which wasn't even there yesterday, and yet a whole city of evil people had turned to God and repented from their evil, and Jonah cannot delight in the mercy they received. And the story just...ends there, leaving us to ponder God's fishy kind of justice.

A funny thing about God's justice is that it is so much more generous than our earthly justice. Instead of working from scarcity, it works from abundance.

We see this truth in Jesus' parable. CoFiA is an organization our church supports in our neighborhoods that works with immigrants, especially around fair payment for day laborers. CoFiA's clients, if they are not documented, have little safe recourse from employers who do not pay them fairly. Sometimes, a hard worker may spend a whole week helping with construction, and then only get paid part of their due from the business owner, or even none of it.

But that is not what Jesus does. In fact, he does quite the opposite. In Jesus' vision of the vineyard, no one lacks payment from the work they have done. Jesus' actions would be like paying the first man a week's wages for construction; then paying someone who worked for just

a day the week's worth of pay. And finally, paying someone who just worked an hour for a whole week's payment. When we hear this, we imagine the injustice rather than imagining the party that the one who worked just an hour and got an unexpected week's worth of pay would have had. Maybe this means the worker could send money back to his family living in Guatemala. Maybe it means that he has the money to sign his son up to play baseball. Maybe he can afford his mother's diabetes medication for another month. This is the scandal of God's abundant and promiscuous grace. As far as the workers in the vineyard go, when the one who worked the full amount of time and got the full amount of wages, but not extra like the others, grumbled. To him, God said, "Are you envious because I am generous?" Or, as translated directly from the Greek, "*Is your eye evil because I am good?*"

What does this say about the world we are in today, right now? It is fair to say that the world is unfair.

It's not fair that our schools are a mess. Our children will have no wise Mrs. Boemig to shepherd them through these confusing and sometimes traumatic times; instead, most of them will have screens, and if they are in school, they have likely been shuffled around quite a bit between teachers, who are being asked to walk on water with such impossible circumstances..

It's not fair that the future of health care, LGBTQ rights, women's rights, affirmative action, and so much more just became much more vulnerable with the death of one formidable Supreme Court Justice last week.

It's not fair that some people living on the West Coast cannot safely leave their homes, because the air is unsafe to breathe due to the fires still raging there. It is not fair that our actions could have slowed the course of climate change, which has created the conditions for these fires, but we chose not to take action.

It's not fair that 200,000 people have died of COVID-19 in this country, and we do not know when or how this pandemic will end.

In the face of such unfairness, the world tells us to grab hold of what we have and save it for ourselves. The world teaches our eyes to look and desire what is evil. But God's message is different. The prophet tells us-- even if reluctantly, and Jesus tells us, that in the face of what is not fair, we need to be generous, because in God's goodness, that is what God does, and that is who God is.

Unlike the world's unfairness, God's fairness lifts others up, rather than pushes them down to the lowest common denominator.

I see our church being generous like that. Although I know many of you struggle with the uncertainty of these times, I have seen our church as a whole give *more*, rather than less, to the church-- especially to the pastoral services fund to help out those who need more mercy in these times. I see it in Ammal and Anne, who have been practicing extreme social distancing,

and therefore were able to safely share a ride up to Johnsonburg last weekend, rather than stay home alone, because each was scared of being unsafe on the trip. I see this generosity in a way that someone from our church shared her vulnerability in a public prayer request for help with her pandemic drinking. Instead of her vulnerability causing shame, it actually encouraged others to not only stand in encouragement of this woman, but to also admit their own struggles with drinking, and work on this together with the woman who first so courageously shared.

Mrs. Boemig was right: life's not fair. But in the face of that, we can offer something better than fairness. We can offer generosity. God's fairness means that no one wins when others are left behind. This grace means good things for our souls. It means that God is rooting for us to succeed, not waiting for us to trip. It means that God helps us when we stumble. As we receive this grace, we can share it just as generously with others. As it is in God's vineyard, let it be so in our lives. Amen.