

## “God isn’t fair!”

If you’re a person who is concerned about equity and fair-play, I’d be willing to bet that today’s readings from *Jonah* and *Matthew* were hard to swallow. Because, in these two readings, God does not seem to be playing fair; at least not by human standards. Let me explain.

In our first reading, Jonah has been sent to the city of Nineveh, because it has come to God’s attention that Nineveh was a city steeped in wickedness. Their crimes included “plotting evil against the Lord,” “cruelty and plundering in war,” “prostitution and witchcraft,” and “commercial exploitation.” So, God sends Jonah to Nineveh, on something of a missionary journey, to see if Jonah can convince them to change their ways.

Initially, Jonah refuses— but that’s a story for another day— but eventually Jonah relents, and goes to Nineveh, and he preaches against their behavior. Suddenly, the people of Nineveh repent of their evil ways, and God “changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them.”

In a telling moment, Jonah complains to God and says, in effect: I knew this would happen. I knew that, as soon as they repented, you would forgive them. In other words, from Jonah’s point of view, the Ninevites didn’t get what they deserved! They got better than they deserved! From Jonah’s point of view, God wasn’t being fair.

In the reading from *Matthew*, Jesus describes the kingdom of God as being like a landowner who hires day-laborers. Although he hires men throughout the day, at the end of the workday, the landowner pays all of the men the exact same wage. Those who worked all day long, begin to grumble: “Oh, give me a break! We’ve worked all day, and you’re paying us all the exact same wage as men who’ve worked a couple of hours? That’s not fair!” And if this parable is meant to describe how things get handled in the kingdom of God, clearly God is *not* fair.

And that, my friends, is the point: God isn’t fair; far from it. Rather, God is lavish. And, more to the point, God’s love is lavish, and God’s forgiveness is lavish, and God’s patience is lavish. And even though we may be the neediest recipients of God’s lavish love and forgiveness and patience — and darned

grateful for it, thank you — we still recoil at the thought that some of those “other” folk receive it as well.

The idea of fairness, of fair play, of justice, of equity, is probably the one thing that people seek most from society. And that’s a good thing, because the human civilization desperately needs justice and equity and fair play to be included among the ethical norms that guide our behavior. However — and this may be the point — in our search for justice, in our search for fairness, *we sometimes sacrifice love.*

This, I think, is the challenge that issues from today’s readings from *Jonah* and *Matthew*: that, in our search for justice and equity, we should not forget love and compassion.

Was God just in his treatment of the citizens of Nineveh? No. Was the landowner equitable in his treatment of his day laborers? No. But in both cases, the people were treated with loving-kindness and compassion.

There’s a lot of unfairness going around. Who hasn’t found themselves log-jammed in rush-hour traffic? You’re in your car, inching along, growing more impatient by the minute and, just as you see the traffic clearing ahead, in your side-view mirror you see some teenagers in their Mustang convertible, zipping along on the shoulder of the road, waving to all of us dummies who chose to obey the law. And where’s there a cop when you want one? That’s not fair.

And it certainly doesn’t seem fair to discover that, after you’ve spent the better part of the evening paying your bills and trying to balance your checkbook— and in the end feeling as low as your bank account balance— to discover on the evening news that the latest winner of the Powerball multi-million dollar jackpot is some guy who looks like he faked an injury so he could live off of disability. That’s definitely not fair!

But maybe, just maybe, the point of today’s readings is this: while it’s a good thing to try to establish a system of justice and equity, it’s a better thing if we *first* seek after the love and compassion and patience of God; because then, we’ll be able to dispense justice in a way that upholds and honors and cherishes life, rather than destroys it.

Justice, tempered by the divine love and compassion and patience, is what God calls us to be about. And when we are tempted to think that that’s no big deal, we should remember Jonah. He’s one of the great men in our spiritual

history. His name has been remembered for thousands of years. His words and exploits have been recalled through hundreds of generations of Christians. He has been counted among the great prophets of Israel. *And all he wanted was nothing less than that the people of Nineveh should perish for their sins. All he wanted was simple justice.*

However, it's not that simple, is it? And it's not that simple because all of those parables about the kingdom of God are showing us that there's a better way. Jesus invites us to move beyond arguments about fairness, and to move towards actions of boundless love. And if anyone should know about letting go of fairness, and embracing love, it's Jesus. For his executioners, Jesus prayed for forgiveness. And to the thief who was on the cross next to him, Jesus promised him a place in "paradise."

So, there is no *quid pro quo* in God's kingdom. In fact, the idea of "rights" or "entitlements" do not exist in any place where Jesus is Lord. And since there is no balance sheet in heaven, there should be none on earth. Just open arms. Arms open for the twisted, yet repentant, Ninevites, in today's Old Testament lesson. Arms open for the ne'er-do-wells who get there for the last hour of work, in today's Gospel lesson. Arms open, in other words, for people who, more often than not, look an awful lot like you and me.

St. John Chrysostom, once thought to be one of the finest preachers of the early church, may have said it best. When preaching on this morning's reading from *Matthew*, he asked the question:

"Why is it that the householder seemed to give the workers, regardless of their labors, exactly the same reward?"

Answering his own question, Chrysostom said:

"It is because God has only one reward to give, a reward that has no measure in money or hours or days or years— and that reward is God Himself."

And fair or not, just or not, this is a gift we should begrudge no one. Amen.