

“God Isn’t Fair!”
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16
First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield, WI
September 20, 2026
Dr. Roger R. Keller

We have all found ourselves in situations where someone else gets benefits that we aren’t receiving. Perhaps they get a day off for personal leave, and when we need the same, it is refused because something critical is going on that day, and they won’t let us go. Or maybe we are in a class, and the teacher gives us an assignment that isn’t very clear. We do what we think she wants, but when we turn it in, she tells us that we didn’t do what she asked at all. We, therefore, get a grade lower than what we could have gotten, if she had just been clearer.

There are all sorts of moments in life when things aren’t fair. We run into them all the time. Basically, all we can do is grin and bear it. But what if God isn’t fair? Then what do we do? We get an answer in the story of Jonah which I love. Apparently, Jonah had been a prophet for some time, because he clearly recognizes the voice of the Lord. But he also knows that the Lord is good and gracious, and more to the point, forgiving. So, when he is told to go to the Assyrian capital, Ninevah, and call the people to repentance, he just knows that he is not going to like the results. He just knows that God is going to forgive those rotten Assyrians, and he doesn’t want to be any part of that scenario.

Thus, he catches the first ship he can going in absolutely the opposite direction. Well, God is willing to play that game with him. He sends a storm to batter the ship. The sailors do their best to deal with that, but things get worse and worse. Jonah tells them that it is all his fault for not doing as God told him to do, and told them to throw him overboard. They don’t want to do that, and so they lighten their load as much as they can, but things only get worse. Finally, in desperation, the crew takes Jonah at his word, and tosses him overboard.

Then, along comes a large fish, and Jonah hitches a ride back east in the fish’s belly. That must have smelled wonderful. After a three-day ride, Jonah gets spit up on the beach, I presume once again in Israel, and once again is told to go preach in Ninevah. By now, he has gotten the message and does what he is told. He goes a day’s walk into the city, and begins to preach against the practices of

the people, and they hear what he is saying. They put on sack clothes and ashes, and begin to fast. Even the king begins to fast and takes off all his royal robes and exchanges them for sack cloth, which is really just gunny sacks. That would really be uncomfortable, but that was the point. The Lord sees the people's response and backs off from the promised destruction.

Needless to say, Jonah is anything but happy. He was happy to preach destruction to those rotten Ninevites, but his worst fears were realized when the Lord had compassion on them. That just wasn't fair. Jonah wanted to see fire and brimstone rain down from heaven on them. He wanted all those foreigners to fry, and the reason he ran away in the first place was because he knew the character of God and that he just might forgive the people of Ninevah. Not fair. Not fair. Not fair.

So, he sits down on a hill overlooking the city, hoping still that there might be some kind of consequence to the city and the people. As the scripture says, sitting on that hill in the heat of the day, he got uncomfortable, so the Lord caused a plant to grow up and shade Jonah, for which he was very grateful. But then a cut worm arrived in the night and the plant withered and died, leaving Jonah at the mercy of the hot, blistering east wind. He wanted to die he was so down in the dumps. The Lord uses his condition as a parable to highlight what he himself had done for Ninevah. If Jonah could feel sorry for the plant—actually he was really feeling sorry for himself—then couldn't he feel empathy for the people of Ninevah of whom there were 120,000, with all their animals? Were they not worthy of compassion?

The whole point of the Christian faith is that God is not fair where the human family is concerned. If he were, we would all be in deep, deep trouble. The very fact that Christ came to die on a Roman cross for us, underlines the fact that God is anything but fair by our standards. He loves us. He loves us without reservation, and was willing to put himself on the line for us. If we reach out to him, no matter what we have done, his cross stands there for us. Even those that, given our lights, we would send to hell in a handbasket, like Hitler and Stalin, his love and his cross are there even for them. I have no idea how his justice and mercy merge to deal with the truly great sinners of the world, but I know that they are encompassed by God's love. The cross was for them as well as for any of us.

The beauty of the Gospel is that none of us has to be perfect to receive God's love. We just need to reach out to him and let ourselves be engulfed in the love of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Out of love, we are invited into their love. Their perfection is transferred to us. But I think the key is that WE need to reach out to them with the faith that they love us as we stand at the foot of the cross.

For many across time, the passage from Matthew has always been a very hard one. We all know about contracts and time clocks and payment by the hour. When we read Jesus' parable about the workers in the vineyard, it is hard not to feel that the persons who worked all day, right through the hot time, should have gotten more than those who just put in the last hour. But again, this story is underlining, even more than the story of Jonah, that God does not play by our rules. His love overrides all the rules of fairness that we can concoct.

It was the practice of Jesus' day, for people who were essentially day-laborers, to gather in the town square in the early morning hours where people looking for help would come and pick out the ones they thought could best help them. So, the owner of the vineyard came at six in the morning, and from the group chose some to go work in his vineyard, promising them a denarius, the standard wage for a day. For some reason, he wandered back at 9 in the morning, found some still seeking work, and hired some of them without promising any specific payment. The same scene is acted out at 12 noon, 3 pm, and 5 pm.

At the end of the day, the owner started with those whom he had hired last. He paid them a denarius, the amount normally given for a day's work, as we noted earlier. He then paid the folks who came at 3 pm, noon, and 9 am giving them a denarius each. We can only imagine the expectations of those who were hired at 6 am. Wow, if those hired after us are getting a denarius each, we sure ought to be getting more! But, as it turned out, the owner gave them each a denarius, too. They were affronted, and at least one of them let the owner know that they were not happy. They had been there all day, had worked through the heat of the day, and they thought they were owed more than just the minimum wage.

The owner doesn't even blink. "I have given you what I promised and what you agreed to. Why are you complaining? Go home to your family and be grateful for

the work you had today. I chose to be generous to the one's who came later, and isn't that my right if I want to be generous with my money?" But, of course, this parable isn't about money at all, is it? It is really about undeserved grace. It is very hard for us human beings not to want to earn God's love and grace. That is why it is very hard for us to accept the absolutely free gift of God's love for us and to us. We hate to be in debt to anyone, even God, or maybe especially God. It basically means that we haven't earned that love, and so we are indebted to God for all that he gives us. We will always be in debt to him. We will always owe him. Owing for 30 years on a mortgage is bad enough, but at least we can pay that off. But this debt with God is eternal, and we will never get out from under it in a lifetime, and not even in the eternities.

But the good news of the gospel is that we don't have to pay it off. We can't pay it off with contributions to the church, although those are always needed and accepted. We can't pay it off with church attendance, although as we come to understand God's love and care for us, we will want to be here. We can't pay it off by giving to Soup or Socks, although those contributions to the needy in the community are always appreciated. Love for those in need is simply Christ's love passing through us to the persons around us. Rather, the only thing we can do that Christ would like from us is to simply surrender ourselves to him and enter the circle of his arms. There is where we will find peace and safety.

However, there is one way that we can repay his love in a small way. The early disciples did this. They went out and let everyone know what they had found in Jesus Christ, and you and I can and should do this in our daily lives. No, I'm not talking about standing on the street corner waving our bibles in the air for all to see. Rather, I'm talking about living the kind of life that Christ calls all his followers to live. A life of inclusion and love for all. One of the hardest things for me to understand is how people who claim to know Jesus Christ can't see that the Gospel includes all persons of all races, all sexes, and all nationalities, as well as all religions.

God speaks in many voices and in many ways. The varied Christian voices aren't the only voices with which he speaks, although for me, they are the clearest and show the heights and depths to which God will go to get our attention. For me, the crucifix is still the ultimate symbol of God's love when coupled with the empty

tomb and with Christ's resurrection. Visually, I find these the most compelling images of what God has done for the human family.

But others hear God speaking with alternate voices. They hear his voice in the teachings Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. They hear him speaking to them through Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu the principal Hindu Gods. For the Jains of India, there are 24 Tirthankaras or spiritual guides, the last of which was Mahavira, whom they follow. Muslims follow the teachings of Muhammad as found in the Qur'an. Taoists follow the teachings of Lao Tzu found in the Tao Te Ching. All are trying to walk, to the best of their abilities, in the channels of love that God has given them. God will accept all their offerings of love and service, and will use them to the good of all of us.

No, God is not fair by human standards. There is no one way to him, no one way to bribe him, no one way to please him, other than simply giving ourselves unequivocally to him. For us, the most direct way is to give ourselves to Jesus Christ, and let him remake us in his love and image.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.