

Sermon for Proper 20A  
Sunday, September 24, 2023  
“God’s Unlimited Grace and Mercy”

Texts: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of my favorite quotes by a famous person was said by the well-known evangelist and author T.D. Jakes, who said: “Grace is when God gives you what you don’t deserve, and mercy is when God doesn’t give you what you do deserve.” In other words, God blesses us despite our imperfection and sinfulness, and God doesn’t smite us when we do make mistakes. That wisdom is a great summary of this morning’s lectionary readings: the reading from Jonah shows us God’s mercy, and the reading from Matthew reminds us of God’s grace.

Let’s begin with the first reading from the prophet Jonah. Now, there’s a back story to the reading. The Book of Jonah begins in this way: Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” That is to say, Assyria’s wickedness had come up on God’s radar; he was done with it and he wanted Jonah to speak out against it. But what did Jonah do? He immediately tried to run away from God by jumping on the next boat headed for Tarshish, which is believed to be modern-day Spain. Maybe he thought God was present only in Israel or something; most near-Eastern cultures during that time believed that the gods belonged to one particular place or one group of people. Soon into the journey a violent storm arose, and the sailors presumed that somebody’s god was mad, so they cast lots to see whose god was causing the storm. Jonah got the short end of the stick, which didn’t surprise the sailors, since Jonah had already told them that he was running away from God. So, to calm the wrath of Jonah’s god and save the rest of the crew, they threw Jonah into the sea, at which point God sent a big fish to gobble him up and take him back to where he started. (We can try to run away from God, but when he calls us to do something, he has a way of sending storms and big fish into our lives to wake us up and place us where he wants us to be so that we can do what he wants us to do.) Eventually, Jonah went to Nineveh, when God commanded him a second time, to cry out against wickedness of the people of Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. Their brutality was known throughout the region, and they were responsible for the annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel. Jonah’s task was to go to Nineveh, tell them of their wicked ways, and urge them to repent. He did, and they repented. The king even issued a decree of fasting and wearing sackcloth. So, God spared the Ninevites of his wrath. The twist in the story is that Israel’s prophets are usually fiercely obedient to God and preach long and hard for the people to whom they prophesy to repent. Here, Jonah told the people of Nineveh in a few words, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” and they quickly repented. Easy!

But, that really ticked off Jonah! He wanted divine justice; he wanted God to smite the Ninevites for all they had done against Israel. “How could you do that, God? After all that they’ve done to us and the way they have terrorized Israel!” But, God quickly spared the Ninevites, because God is merciful. God did not give Nineveh what Jonah thought they deserved. Jonah didn’t want the Ninevites to receive the same mercy he had received from God by sparing his life when he tried to flee from God. He was angry that God was being the impartial, merciful God that he is. Jonah, however, just wouldn’t let go of his anger. Jonah would not forgive.

Last Sunday we heard about forgiveness. Forgiveness leads to reconciliation and the restoration of relationships, but we can’t do any of that unless we are able to let go of our anger, our grudges, and our gripes. Holding onto those things, holding on to the events of our past just holds us back. It keeps us from moving forward in our lives. It is easy to blame somebody else, especially if we find ourselves in a place or situation where we wish we weren’t. Jonah tried to sulk in his anger and not let God be God, but this story reminds us that God *is* indeed merciful. He is merciful even to those whom we think deserve punishment. God’s mercy wasn’t just for God’s chosen people in Jonah’s time, and it’s not just for Christians in the present age; God’s mercy extends to *all* of his creation, no matter who they are or what they’ve done. We must accept that and trust that.

Linked with God’s mercy is God’s grace. That is the message we find in the passage from Matthew’s Gospel. God’s kingdom is like the landowner who hired some workers and agreed to pay them a certain wage. He solicited workers all during the day and paid them all the same wage. At the end of the day, the first set of workers were mad, because the guys that worked only an hour received the same pay as those who had worked all day. That wasn’t fair, in their minds, but the landowner said that he was free to spend his money however he wished. You all know that I’m into reality television. There’s a TV show on BRAVO called *Below Deck*. It is a show about the crew of a luxury charter yacht; the show focuses on the drama between the guests and crewmembers and who is sleeping with whom. At the end of each cruise, the guests give the captain a tip and the captain divides the tip with the crew. There was one particular episode that has always stuck with me. The guests gave the crew \$11,000 and the captain gave each crewmember \$1,100, including the new, inexperienced guy who messed around the entire cruise, did hardly any work, and repeatedly angered his fellow crew. The rest of the crew was all bent out of shape when the captain gave him an equal share of the tip, because they did not think the new guy deserved the same tip as the rest of them, because he did less work. When I saw this, I thought to myself, “The captain must’ve been reading his Bible!” The actions of the captain and that of the landowner in the parable from the Gospel resemble the grace that God shows to us. God gives us what we don’t deserve. It is meant to portray the grace, generosity, and sovereignty of God.

Some of us here may have had a relationship with God since we were children; some may have come to know God through Christ in our adulthood; some of you may

still be trying to figure out what your relationship with God is supposed to look like; some do not find God until the moment of their death. No matter how long we have had a relationship with God, each of us is still the recipient of God's unlimited and unmerited grace throughout our lives and even after death.

The demonstration of the unmerited grace of God toward humanity is no more profound than what we experience in the Eucharist. The world was eager to get rid of God's who became human and lived among us here on Earth. Jesus suffered and was crucified on a cross. God became man to live like one of us and gave himself for us in death for our sake. In his resurrection, our eternal salvation was secured for us. Humanity didn't deserve that. Humanity constantly turned its back on God, and continues to turn its back on God, but his love for us is unlimited and he continues to love us. The price that Jesus Christ paid on the cross has paid for our salvation. That is the most significant example of God's unlimited grace.

If it were up to us, we would want justice. In the human economy, we get paid for the work we do; we clock in and out, and we get paid for the hours we've worked. The longer we work, the more we get paid. If we don't work, we don't get paid. In the economy of the world, we get rewarded for the good things we do and punished for the bad things we do. But, in God's economy, he blesses us simply because he loves us. We tend to be like Jonah; we want to get what we deserve and expect others to get the same: blessings and praise when we do good, justice and punishment when we do evil. We are like the laborers; we want to be duly rewarded for our hard work, and those who do little should get little or nothing. The good news for us is that the kingdom of God does not work that way. God blesses us when we don't deserve it because of his grace, and he spares us the punishment we ought to receive because of his mercy. Amen.

### Resources

*Feasting on the Word* for Proper 20 (Year A, Volume 4)

*The Working Preacher*, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2011](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2011)

*Bible Bounty*, <http://beambiblebounty.blogspot.com/2014/09/economy-and-grace.html>