

Sermon for Proper 20A  
Sunday, September 24, 2017  
“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.

The well-known evangelist and author T.D. Jakes offers these words of wisdom that I just love, “Grace is when God gives you what you don’t deserve, and mercy is when God doesn’t give you what you do deserve.” That quote came to mind as I thought about the lectionary readings for this week, because they show us exactly that: the reading from Jonah shows us God’s mercy, and the reading from Matthew reminds us of God’s grace.

I’ll begin with the reading from the prophet Jonah. Jonah, I’m sure you remember, was the guy who was gobbled up by the whale. Well, not really! The scripture reading says it was a big fish. Anyway, let’s review what happened to Jonah that led to where we are in today’s reading. The opening verse of the Book of Jonah says, “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.” And what did Jonah do? He immediately tried to run away from God by buying a ticket on a boat headed for Tarshish, which is believed to be modern-day Spain. Maybe he thought God was present only in Israel or something; after all, most cultures during that time, except for the Israelites, believed that gods belonged to one particular place or one group of people. Soon into the journey a big wind came along, 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 fleeing 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. (You know, we can try to run away from God, but when he is calling 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 Jonah finally went to Nineveh, after God called him a second time, to cry out against their wickedness. 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 went to Nineveh, told them of their wicked ways, urged them to repent, and they did! The king even issued a decree of fasting and wearing sackcloth. And so, God spared the Ninevites of his wrath. There is a bit of irony here: Israel's prophets are usually fiercely obedient to God and preach long and hard for their audience to repent; here, Jonah was not only disobedient to God at first, but five his short sermon to the people of Nineveh, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" won them over and they repented.

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?" God did it, 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 just received from God by sparing his life after he repented for having 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 hold us back. They keep us from moving forward in our lives. It is easy to blame somebody else, if we find ourselves in a place or situation where we'd rather not be. 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 to those who we think deserve a different fate. God's mercy wasn't just for the Israelites back then, and it's not just for us now. God's mercy extends to all of his creation, no matter who they are. It is up to us to accept it or not.

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 a landowner who hired some workers and agreed to pay them a certain wage. He solicited workers all during the day and agreed to pay 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 got the same pay as those who worked all day. That just wasn't fair, in their minds. You all know that I'm into

reality television. There's a TV show on BRAVO called *Below Deck*. It is a mindless reality show about the crew of a luxury charter yacht; most of the show is about the drama between the crewmembers and who is sleeping with whom. But there's one particular episode from a few seasons ago that has always stuck with me. At the end of any cruise, the clients give the captain a tip and the captain divides the tip with the crew. These particular clients gave the crew \$11,000 and the captain gave each crewmember \$1,100, including the new guy who messed around the entire cruise and did hardly any work. The rest of the crew was all bent out of shape, because they did not think the new guy deserved the same tip as everyone else, because he did less work. When I saw this, I thought to myself, "The captain must've been reading his Bible," because the actions of the captain and the landowner in today's lesson resemble the grace that God shows to us. 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.

The demonstration of the unmerited grace of God toward us will be no more profound than what we will experience shortly in the Eucharist. The world was eager to get rid of the presence of God 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; we still turn our backs 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 ultimate offering of God's unlimited grace.

If it were up to us, we would want justice. In our economy, we get paid for the work we do; the harder we work, the more we get paid. If we don't work, we don't get paid. In the economy of the world, we like to be rewarded for the things we do, but in God's economy this is not the case;

in God's economy, he blesses us simply because he loves us. We are just like Jonah; we want to get what we deserve and others to get the same: blessings when we do good and justice when we do bad. We are like the laborers, too; we want to be rewarded for 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 with what we don't deserve because of his grace, and he spares us the punishment we're due 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>