

Jonah 3:10-4:11 Matthew 20:1-16
“That hardly seems fair”
September 20, 2026

In a strange, slightly twisted kind of way, I rather like Jonah. He's so honest. He's so real in his reluctance, his acquiescence, his resentment, his transformation.

Jonah was a prophet – one that was reluctant to respond to God's plans concerning the city of Nineveh. The people of Nineveh, the story says, were wicked and evil only, and Jonah was to go to Nineveh and speak out against it.

Jonah is not keen on the assignment – interestingly, not because he thinks that he won't be successful in Nineveh, but rather because he dreads the idea that he might actually convince Nineveh to repent and come to the Lord.

Jonah's initial response to God's call is to head out in the opposite direction from Nineveh – hitching a ride on a ship bound for Spain. When the ship is out in the deepest water, a violent storm hits, threatening to cause the ship to capsize. The crew responds by dumping as much cargo as possible. They try even more drastic measures – they pray, each to their own god. Then they remember that Jonah worships the God of Israel and they awaken him to pray to his God, to Yahweh.

Jonah knows almost immediately what is causing the storm, or rather who it is that has churned up the waters. He appeals to the crew to throw him overboard so that the ship and its personnel might be saved. They do so, with great dread lest Jonah's God turn on them for hurling Jonah into the sea. So great is their dread, in fact, that they pray to Jonah's God "O Lord, we pray, don't punish us with death for taking this man's life! Then, they shift the blame – You, O Lord, are responsible for all this; it is your doing."

The very moment Jonah is dumped into the sea, the waters calm, and everyone is safe. Jonah is swallowed by a big fish, and after 3 days and 3 nights, Jonah appeals to the Lord for his life. He is spit up on shore, beached if you will, and true to his "down-in -the-belly-of-the-fish-promise" to God, he turns to go to Nineveh.

Jonah has no affection for Nineveh. He speaks the words Yahweh has given him to say, words that appeal to the people to repent of and change their ways. However, in his heart, Jonah hopes that the people will not listen, that they will be judged and damned by Yahweh.

Irony of ironies, just when you want to fail, you win!! The people of Nineveh listen to Jonah, don sack cloth and ashes and give their hearts over entirely to repentance, give their lives over wholly to Yahweh and Yahweh's laws. Naturally, what was Yahweh to do?? Since the people had listened to Jonah's call, Yahweh determines not to punish or to destroy them.

And Jonah is not pleased!!! He is, in fact, very, very angry. He confronts Yahweh: "Lord, didn't I say before I left home that this is just what you would do? That's why I did my best to run away to Spain! I knew that you are a loving and merciful God, always patient, always kind, always ready to change your mind and not punish."

Obviously, Jonah doesn't get it, so God sets Jonah down under a plant, to think it all out. At first the plant offers abundant shade. But then the plant dies, as mysteriously and as quickly as it had sprung up. And the heat becomes unbearable for Jonah.

At this turn of events, Jonah becomes angrier still and voices his longing to die. To this



God responds: "This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it and you didn't make it grow - yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh?"

Now, before we shake our heads in disbelief, before we judge Jonah for resenting that the people of Nineveh could be saved "after everything they had done", let's consider this. Who among us truly hopes/prays for the conversion of the hearts of people who live to and for themselves with no thought of or compassion for others? Who among us truly hopes/prays for people who have committed unspeakable crimes – or for people who have brutalized others? Who among us truly hopes/prays for the very people who have hurt us or our children? Indeed, who among us would fall on our knees rejoicing if, when we arrive in heaven, we discover that – you supply the name – is there?

When we hear Jesus' parable this morning, with whom do we identify, sympathize? Most of us, I suspect, feel indignant and outraged and ready to go on strike with the 12 hours-in-the-sun workers when they discover that everyone is receiving the same pay for varying hours of labour – 12-9-6-3-hours, even 1 hour? Does the indignation and sense of injustice flare even more when we see the workers line up to await their pay – the 1-hour labourers first, and on down the line to those who have toiled 12 hours and now have to wait until last?

It's a little like how we feel when we've been in line at a store and then another cashier invites the one way behind us to come to his register, while we continue to stand in line. It's a little like what we think when we hear of someone having a deathbed conversion. I mean, we are in church every week, for our entire lives. We volunteer countless hours to work on church committees, to serve in mission and outreach. We listen to countless sermons. We give our money, money that we know others spend on their homes and cars and vacations and clothes and ... – and then we discover that all the 11th hour-come-latelys are loved by God every bit as much as we are loved, that they will be welcomed into God's kingdom as eagerly and readily as we are welcomed.

In the parable that begins, "For the kingdom of heaven is like ...", Jesus says that when the 12-hour-day workers saw that the 1-hour-workers received the same pay that they did, "they grumbled against the landowner." The landowner's response to the workers and God's response to us is "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

And Jonah cried out to God, accusing God of being too merciful, too slow to anger, too abounding in steadfast love, too ready to relent from punishing. And he was right!

However, fair or not, we need to know that God is still calling the Jonahs of the world – calling us who know him and serve him – calling us to tell people about God, to urge people to come to God instead of going through life on their own terms.

God is calling us to ask ourselves – can we find it in our hearts and in our faith to pray for the selfish and self-centred; for the brutalizers and violent offenders in our world; for the perpetrators of unspeakable crimes; for those who have hurt us or someone we love? I confess, it's going to take some work in my heart and my soul – and I need to sing the words and the prayer of our opening hymn, often "Thank you O my Father, for giving us your Son; and leaving your Spirit 'til your work on earth is done."

As I worked with these passages from God's Holy Word this week, I'm realizing that I don't spent as much time as I should, praying that those who start and perpetuate wars; those who willfully hurt others, sometimes just for sport; those who take what they want no matter

who is left destitute; those who bully and lie and hoard more wealth than they could possibly need while others are starving ... I don't spend as much time as I should praying that they will come to know God, to rest on his love and within his promises – that they will give themselves heart and soul to God so that whether it be soon or whether it be many years from now, they will be ready and even eager to be welcomed into the Kingdom God promises to all who love him.

As I listen to Jonah's story and to Jesus' parable, I hear God calling each of us to reach out with his story, to tell his story, to show his love and grace to those around us who aren't yet convinced or who don't realize what they're missing – from the circle of our friends, our family, and beyond. And I hear God urging us, most of all, to at least pray for those whom we might judge to be the least deserving of all people of God's forgiveness and salvation.