

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:  
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

It didn't occur to me to label this a Worship Series, but these three Sundays in September have been progressions on a theme. We went from Jesus' teaching about conflict to his teaching about forgiveness – forgiveness that does not quit, no matter how many times it's required. That's a wonderful idea, isn't it? But sometimes forgiveness makes us mad. Sometimes seeing a perpetrator met with grace and love is outrageous.

One evening in June 2015, a young white supremacist joined in a bible study at Mother Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, and as the meeting turned to prayer, he pulled out a gun and began to shoot participants, shouting racial slurs. He killed nine, including the beloved pastor, Clementa Pinckney. Forty-eight hours later at Dylan Roof's first hearing, some family members of those lost spoke out, saying they forgave him, as devastated as they were. That prompted not a little outrage among the public. When Pope John Paul II forgave the man who tried to assassinate him, it baffled some, and made others mad.

We have a biblical precedent for this way of seeing things – the prophet Jonah. Jonah was so outraged at the idea that God might give the wicked people of Nineveh a chance to be saved, he ran away when God told him to go there and call them to repentance. He went the other direction, took the first ship out, ended up overboard and spent three days in the belly of a whale, so the story goes – and when he's coughed up on the beach, God is still telling him, "Go to Nineveh." So he goes, and they do repent, and he's so furious he wants to die. Because wicked people are going to be forgiven. God forbid!

It's an odd story, a subversive story, sticking it to those who think righteousness trumps mercy. In the realm of God, generosity always seems to win in the end. And we don't always like it. Jesus was adept at the subversive story too. Like the writer of Jonah, he used odd, satirical stories – parables – to subvert the viewpoint of the ruling elites.

Many of his parables chime this theme, of ridiculous, profligate, wasteful love –  
leaving 99 sheep in harm's way to go after one missing;  
forgiving your wastral son when he returns after squandering half your fortune.

But this parable really gets people's goats.

It doesn't matter how clearly the landowner says, "Isn't it my right to do what I  
want with my money?," and the fact that nobody got less than promised –  
which they thought was a good wage when they agreed to work –  
many can't get past the fact that people got paid the same wages for different shifts.  
Though no one got less than promised, they don't like that some got more.

This parable is an affront to over-achievers everywhere. Even average achievers.  
What kind of a way is this to run a business?

How do you incentivize productivity in a system like this?

Does this sound like what the world suggests for those who want to get ahead?

What kind of fairness is this? Where the first ones in, are the last in line?

The last ones in move up to the front? Where sweat counts for nothing?

Where we who show up at church each Sunday get no more than the C&E folks?

Well – it's certainly not fair in any sense that we recognize with human logic.  
God's idea of fairness and ours often don't match.

Jesus taught these parables about the Kingdom because it doesn't make  
intuitive sense. If it made sense, he wouldn't have to explain it, right?

Jesus taught that the ways of the Kingdom are upside-down:

In the Kingdom we are to love our enemies;

give away your coat if someone asks for it, even in winter;

don't worry, no matter how stressful your life is;

forgive as often as you need to, no matter who's wronged you.

Jesus told these stories to get through people's heads that

the way the world works and the way the Kingdom works are very different.

It's grace, and grace is not fair, fundamentally not fair.

And on our good days, we say, "Whew!" because we know we get a pass.

On our worse days, we say, "Hey! How come that one's getting a break?"

God is not "fair" according to human ideas of fair. Because God is not human.

I've heard it said that God created humankind in God's own image...

and ever since we've been trying to return the favor.

But God does not think like we do. And we are not God.

But do we achievers want to be told that those who are first in position, first in achievement, are not necessarily going to be first in the Kingdom of Heaven? In fact, there will be no “first?” All equal? Then what’s the point? Why bother?

It doesn’t matter how hard you work. It doesn’t matter how good you are... God’s in charge, and God can be gracious to you – and to all kinds of other, much less deserving people. What’s up with that?! Someone could be sinning up a storm, living it up until the last moment, and they get to roll right into paradise, maybe knocking you down on the way in!

Does it make you mad, the possibility that God loves and forgives those who have not kept their bargains, done their work, followed God’s ways? How do we feel about the promise that God might welcome into heaven people who have lived a life of selfishness and greed, who have hurt us or others – yes, even that spouse who cheated, that boss who fired you, that parent who abused or neglected you – can come skating into faith at the last minute. Does it bother us that God might accept them with the same open arms with which God will accept us? Because that’s what Jesus is saying...

The cry of the Jonahs; the good girls and boys over all the ages is: “Why are other people getting rewarded when they’ve been bad? When they haven’t done half the good I’ve done?”

That’s where the folks who worked all day in the vineyard got really ticked:

“You have made them equal to us,” they say – that’s the real offense.

And worse – that no matter how hard we try “be good,” be right,

God loves them as much as God loves us! Or, as I once heard Bishop Tutu say, with his trademark little giggle, “It’s a pity God’s standards are so low.”

Damn! We don’t get to compare ourselves to other people.

What usually gets us into trouble is what got these 12-hour workers into trouble; comparing ourselves to others instead of focusing on what we have received.

When we grasp that we have enough – and I think most everyone here has enough – we can start rejoicing in other people’s good fortune.

When we see ourselves in the light of God instead of compared to other people, we are set free to start seeing them in the light of God and asking,

“What do you want me to do for that person whom you love?”

It’s not about fair. God’s way is not about fair. It’s about grace,

unmerited, overwhelming, pushed down, overflowing, world-changing grace.

The currency of the Kingdom of Heaven is grace, unmerited love and forgiveness in abundance, water from a rock, manna from heaven.

It is totally up to God to give, to whomever God wants, no matter how much or how little we try to please God.

I have heard God say, *I am already as delighted with you, as I can ever be. You could stop contributing, producing, accomplishing now, I would still love you the most.*

The Kingdom of Heaven is not for strivers – it is for what we become when we've finally reached the end of our striving and give up. Give in.

Grace goes beyond the contract. We cannot earn it, no matter how hard we work.

One day I was talking with someone who believes so much in the “works” part of faith. When I said, “There’s nothing God needs for us to do to please God

– plenty God invites us to do, but nothing that is required,” beyond believing – he said: “Then why bother?! Why do anything for God?”

And I said, “Because love can’t stay in. When we know we’re loved, the love flows out of us. Those God-pleasing things become a grateful response, not a duty.”

Because Jesus already accomplished it all for me. And for you.

And for those 11<sup>th</sup> hour workers whom nobody has invited into the vineyard yet.

God loves us with a love that made us, that knows us, that frees us, transforms us. We can’t earn it. We don’t need to ask for it.

All we have to do, my friends, is receive it.

And give it away and come back for more.

All we bring is empty hands ready to receive grace that is enough today,

until that eternal day when we sit at the heavenly banquet table,

with all kinds of people who in this life we considered undeserving,

whom we wouldn’t want to spend a day with, let alone eternity –

but in the next we will love with the Father’s love,

enjoying with them that that feast that never runs out.

That’s some good news to share, my friends.

Ain’t nothing fair about the love of God.

Thanks be to God!

*Amen.*

**Matthew 20:1-16**

"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

**Jonah 3:10 – 4:11**

When God saw what the people of Nineveh did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"