

September 20, 2026 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Jonah 3:10-4:11 | Matthew 20:1-16 – *That's Not Fair: God Doesn't Keep Score*

Every parent, grandparent, or anyone who has ever worked with children before already knows this phrase by heart. Somebody gets the bigger slice, the last turn, the front seat — and it comes out before they've even finished processing what happened: "That's not fair!" Not an argument. Not a complaint you can reason with. Just an instinct, pure and immediate, before the child even fully knows what "fair" means. They just know something's off, and they know it before they know why.

It can be something as simple as a pair of siblings sharing a bag of M&Ms. The parent dumps the bag out and with the seriousness and precision of an IRS auditor sorts them into two equal piles. Despite each getting the exact same number of M&Ms, one of them isn't happy about it. Maybe the younger sibling feels like their pile is smaller or the older sibling feels they should get more because they're older. Regardless, one of them thinks the outcome isn't fair because it isn't what they wanted.

We like to think we grow out of that. Truth be told, we really don't. We just get better at dressing it up — we stop saying it out loud in the checkout line, we learn to phrase it as a position or stance, or a sigh instead of a shout. But underneath, most of adult life runs on the same circuitry a seven-year-old uses when their sibling gets an extra cookie. We are keeping score. All the time. Quietly. In our everyday lives. Sometimes even in church.

It's part of being human though. We like everything to be equal, as it should be. But rarely is everything truly equal. We want the math to come out even, and it almost never does. So we keep a running tally anyway — who worked harder, who got more, who deserved it and who didn't — as if fairness were something we could audit our way into. Most of the time we just live with the gap. Grumble about it, maybe, and move on. But every so often the gap isn't between us and someone else's good luck — it's between us and someone else's mercy. And that's when the tallying turns into something closer to fury.

Which is why I want to introduce you to a grown man doing exactly what that child does — sitting outside the city of Nineveh, under a plant God grew just for shade, sulking. Not because something bad happened to him. Because something good happened to somebody else, and he can't stand it. The prophet Jonah (and I use that word, prophet loosely), fresh off delivering the shortest, least enthusiastic sermon in the Bible, watches an entire city repent and God relenting,

and instead of throwing a party, throws a tantrum. God spared them. And Jonah is furious.

That's not fair.

Let's look at how Jonah felt in his displeasure. He didn't say "I'm confused" or "I don't understand." Instead, we see that Jonah became angry. At least, that's how our polite translation puts it. In the original Hebrew, it's a lot harsher — Jonah felt it was a great evil to him and that anger burned in him. He felt this repentance was not something good.

Jonah is acting like a petulant child. He's not just disappointed, he's furious he didn't get to see the fire come down from God. He never wanted to go to Nineveh in the first place, he tried to run away from it. Even after facing a terrible storm and being swallowed by fish, Jonah was still pushing back against it. He wanted the forty days to come and go without Nineveh changing their ways. But when Nineveh repented and God relented, Jonah couldn't stomach that mercy.

Now put that next to the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. Jesus tells it simply, there is a vineyard full of day laborers at the end of a long work day. The ones hired first thing in the morning are given the usual daily wage. The ones hired at the end of the day — the leftovers nobody else hired who are still standing around near quitting time because nobody else needed them — worked only one hour and are paid the exact same. When those first workers saw it, like Jonah, they weren't confused; instead they grumbled to the landowner.

Here's what should cause us pause about this: neither Jonah nor the early shift workers are complaining about being shorted. Jonah gets his safety under the bush from the hot sun. The laborers get their full day of pay as agreed to. Neither lose anything. Their issue is that somebody else also didn't lose anything. That mercy or generosity was given to people who they felt hadn't earned it the way they had. Nineveh didn't have to fast as long. The late workers didn't have to work in the heat.

That's the thing about "that's not fair" — it almost never shows up when we're the ones being shortchanged. It shows up when someone else gets what we got, without paying what we paid for it.

Here's where the argument "it's not fair" starts to get strange. When Jonah finally explains himself to God, he doesn't create a new complaint. He quotes scripture. He tells God, "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment." Jonah didn't create

that description out of thin air, it's a direct quote from our Psalm today. Jonah takes this beloved description of God and throws it back at God as some sort of indictment. I knew you'd do this. I knew you were like this. That's exactly the problem. The very thing he'd stand in the temple and praise on any other day becomes, aimed at Nineveh, an accusation.

The laborers do the exact same thing, but instead of scripture their grievance cites their verbal contract. "You made them equal to us." Not "you broke your word" or "you shorted us". Quite the opposite in fact. "You kept your word and that upsets us." They're not accusing the landowner of any kind of injustice. They're accusing him of being generous and using his own fairness as the evidence against him.

Let's sit with that for a bit because that's the whole argument: both Jonah and the first group of laborers reach for the exact language of grace and use it as a weapon the moment grace lands on somebody else. It's not that they didn't know God. They knew him perfectly well. That's the problem. They can recite the mercy. They just never imagined standing next to someone else when it arrived.

Finally, notice what God doesn't do with Jonah and what the landowner doesn't do with the laborers. Neither of them apologize or back down from what they did. But also, neither casts out the ones who are upset.

God asks Jonah a straightforward question: "Is it right for you to be angry?" It's not a rebuke, just a simple question to see where Jonah's mind is at that moment. Jonah, however, doesn't answer and sulks off to build a shelter. God gives him a bush for shade but takes it away the next day to prove a point, which makes Jonah angry again. God asks the question again "Is it right for you to be angry?" to which Jonah says yes. God doesn't lecture Jonah, just gives him some food for thought, "You're so concerned about a bush you had nothing to do with, why can't I be concerned about Nineveh?"

The landowner is more blunt with his assessment. "Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for the usual wage?... Is it not lawful for me to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Where have we been like Jonah or the early laborers in our lives? Where have we grumbled "That's not fair" to someone else's good news?

Maybe it's the coworker who started after you did but got the promotion you had been hoping for. Maybe it's the sibling or cousin that made all the wrong choices growing up but landed on their feet and has a stable life now. Maybe it's seeing

someone get the second chance you never got. It could even be smaller than that. It could be the inkling of something sour when someone else happens to get good news. You keep a tally of who's "earned" what.

But that scale — who deserves it, who's earned it, who's been at it longer — has no place in the kingdom of God. There's no ledger God is keeping to determine who deserves more grace. The reward we receive through faith isn't tiered based on what we've done, how much we've sacrificed, or how long we've believed. It isn't measured in years served or hours logged or how early we showed up to the vineyard. There's no special prize waiting at the end for the ones who kept the better attendance record, gave the larger offering, or never once let their faith wobble. The kingdom doesn't run on seniority. It never did — the parable was never subtle about that, and Jonah found that out the hard way too.

Because it doesn't matter if you were baptized weeks after you were born or on your deathbed. It doesn't matter if you've been faithful and devout your entire life, showing up every Sunday without fail, or if you struggled — if your faith wavered somewhere along the way, went quiet for a season, or nearly disappeared altogether. Believe me — I should know. There was a season in my own life when my faith wasn't strong. When doubt crept in and stayed longer than I care to admit, when scripture didn't move me and the words of the liturgy felt flat and meaningless. I didn't get a lesser grace for it when I found my way back. It was there waiting for me exactly the way it had been the whole time.

Jonah never answers God's question "Is it right for you to be angry?" The book just stops. We don't know what happened to Jonah after that. I used to think this was an odd way to end a book of the Bible but now I think it's the most honest ending in scripture. We don't get a tidy ending to that feeling in our lives either, where the bitterness we're feeling goes away and we're at peace. Instead it sits there, waiting.

I'm not going to tell you to be at peace with it because I'm not sure Jonah or those early workers were. But just because we don't answer the question given to Jonah doesn't mean it goes away. God is going to continue to ask us some version of that question.

We may not know how to answer that question. But whatever we do decide to do with it, grace was never waiting on our answer to keep being grace.

And all of God's people said, Amen!