

“Is It Fair?”

Philip Yancey wrote a book a few years back entitled: *“What’s So Amazing About Grace?”* Before I ever read the book, I loved the title. I fear that, as much as we love the hymn by Robert Newton, we are not that amazed by grace. It becomes for us just another word . . . a church word . . . like narthex, sanctuary, justification, peace, and hymnal. After a while they all kind of meld together into “churchspeak” — a curious conglomerate of words we use in one location, and little or never anywhere else.

“Churchspeak” is a derivative of God-talk, but not as intense. God-talk has its difficulties because, when we speak of God, the language we use is always going to be inadequate. We can use terms like omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, infinite, eternal . . . but we really have no referent for them. We have no experience with any of that. So on one level the words are meaningless — they are non-sense. When we speak of God as gracious, we are trying to describe something that quite frankly runs against the grain of our human desires.

Of course, we want God to be gracious to *us* . . . and that means that God *should* (and that would be the preferred word) deal with us on any basis *but* what we deserve. We know that we have messed up . . . we know that we are not what God would have us be (although a lot of the time we think we come pretty darn close). I had a classmate in college who would come into the bathroom every morning, look in the mirror and say, *“Don’t you ever change, you handsome devil, you!”* When it comes to mirror gazing, we pretty much are content with (or is it resigned to?) what we see.

But when it comes to God dealing with others, we’re not so sure that grace is the applicable term. Wrath comes to mind; vengeance, recompense . . . especially to those who have done us wrong, or whose behaviors just drive us bonkers.

This is the Jonah problem . . . it is a problem that befalls many, many religious people — it's called judgmentalism. Ask anybody who's had more than thirty days of church life what the story of Jonah is about, and you'll likely hear that it's about a whale (big fish) and Jonah's travails in trying to avoid God's call to be a prophet. What we read in today's First Lesson carries what is the true message of the Jonah story. There used to be a marvelous monologue that I just could not get my hands on this week, called *"It Shouldn't Happen to a Dog."* In it Jonah goes on and on about how unfair God has been to him, and the worst unfairness of them all was letting the people of Nineveh get away with it.

As we come to today's First Lesson, we find Jonah distraught, angry, and inconsolable . . . until God did what in Hebrew is known as an *'ot* — God acted out what He wanted Jonah to understand — to embrace! When Jonah's little bush dies, he is bereft; in his own words he was ***"angry enough to die!"*** Oh, how attached we get to things! Things that matter so little; things that bring only momentary pleasure; things that we plot and plan and strive and work to attain, but that all wind up with a little worm in them (materialism) that eats away at the core and eventually reveals the truth — *sic transit gloria mundi* ("how fleeting the glory of the world").

Here's what caught Jonah and hung him out to dry — he knew what God should have done to Nineveh! IF he had been any kind of self-respecting God, He'd have banged some heads together; thrown down a brimstone or two; at least rumbled from the heavens . . . But all God did was send Jonah to announce, ***"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"*** Oh, how Jonah looked forward to that! Them getting what they had coming. Do you catch that . . . the key word? "Them" as in *"Come on, God, give it to them now!"*

We are often like the Lord High Executioner in Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado who's "got a little list" . . .

*As some day it may happen that a victim must be found,
I've got a little list — I've got a little list*

*Of society offenders who might well be underground,
And who never would be missed — who never would be missed!
There's the pestilential nuisances who write for autographs —
All people who have flabby hands and irritating laughs —
All children who are up in dates, and floor you with 'em flat —
All persons who, on shaking hands, shake hands with you like
that —
And all third persons who on spoiling tête-à-têtes insist —
They'd none of 'em be missed--they'd none of 'em be missed!
There's the banjo serenader, and the others of his race,
And the piano-organist — I've got him on the list!
And the people who eat peppermint and puff it in your face,
They never would be miss'd — they never would be miss'd!
Then the idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone,
All centuries but this, and every country but his own;
And the lady from the provinces, who dresses like a guy,
And who "doesn't think she dances, but would rather like to
try";
And that singular anomaly, the lady novelist —
I don't think she'd be missed — I'm sure she'd not be missed!*

We know who God (if He were the kind of God made in our image) should get (I bet you could come up with a rather extensive list right now!). But alas and alack — God doesn't do things our way. He insists on being gracious.

In today's Gospel, we hear the parable of the Vineyard Workers. For many of you I am sure that it's a familiar story. Some people were hired early in the day, others a little later, still others much later, the last bunch just before quitting time. The man doing the hiring just isn't very smart, because he gives a full-day's wage to the last hirees. This only fuels speculation among those hired earlier that they would get more (union rules, and all that!)

Now here would be the smart way to run such a business: Pay the ones

hired first, give them the daily wage, then with each successive group, mark down the payment proportionately. This dummy not only pays the last hires the prevailing wage, he does it first so everyone can see! (What a dope!) And, on top of that, he wants to argue the fairness of it! He can't! It's NOT FAIR!

Sure, he can do what he wants with his own money . . . we all know the Golden Rule: "*The one with the gold makes the rules.*" We all accept that. But just as the story of Jonah is not essentially about the big fish, so this parable is not about fiscal policy or marketplace values.

The last sentence in the story (the last sentence in the reading is "So the last will be first, and the first will be last.") reads thusly in your bulletin, ". . . *are you envious because I am generous?*" That is a horribly misleading translation — and just about every contemporary version has something like it. It does sound like that the point of the parable is about monetary issues. Literally the Greek says "*Is the eye of you evil* (πονηρος ponoros) *that mine is good* (αγαθος agathos)?" Think on that meaning visually: evil eye . . . good eye.

Here's the problem (for us) with grace; God looks upon all with a good eye. We tend to reserve that judgment for ourselves and a few close associates. Often in our use of language we betray the evil eye: "I am socially lubricated; you are inebriated; he is drunk!" "I am fiscally responsible; you are careful with a dollar; she is cheap!" "I am diametrically disadvantaged; you are putting on weight; she is obese!" "I live in the fast lane; you exceed the speed limit; he is a jerk!"

What is so amazing about grace (as God does it) is its indiscriminate application. God just gushes His grace over any and all — Democrat and Republican (who can't believe it applies to the other one) . . . liberal and conservative (who see the other as pure evil) . . . law-abiding and looter (one of them has something coming to them) . . . hard-boiled and tender-hearted (who will not trust the judgment of the other) . . . thinker and feeler (thinkers think that feelers do not think; feelers feel that thinkers do not feel) .

All those dichotomies that we are prone to make just don't compute in God's grace-equation. All you have to do to have grace is say "Yes" to it. *"I want it."* Bingo. You got it! In fact, you always had it. That's the message of Jonah and this parable.

Nineveh did not get God's grace by repenting. Nineveh had God's grace already (His eye on them was good); that's why Jonah was sent! When they repented the walls that got in the way of that grace filling their lives came down! But they already had it.

The first workers did not get cheated — they received justice (they got what they needed, a denarius; which belies the translation about generosity because the vineyard owner is not especially generous). The eye of the owner was good to them all. God's grace does not work by our rules, our thought processes, our values.

Richard Carelson writes of this parable that he was thinking about it as he looked at his garden, especially the "wild zucchini" that came as surprising gift . . . and concludes: *"When our only measure is fairness, when our preoccupation is our just desserts, we lose touch with a sense of grace and graciousness. We forget about the wild zucchinis, the people who love us more than we deserve, and the God who has extended generosity and forgiveness to us. True compassion is probably most evident not when the deserving share their well-deserved surplus, but when those who feel that they have been blessed and forgiven beyond what they have right or reason to expect express their gratitude."*

Is grace fair? Is God fair? No! — Thank God! Do we get what we deserve? No! — Thank God! Do we get what we think we have coming? No! — Thank God! What we get is grace — unearned, lavish, unending, transforming. Thanks be to God!

St. Paul began ten of his thirteen letters with a greeting; I make it a closing. Good Lutherans should know the reply (Hint: We use it several times in our liturgies): ***"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*** Amen.