

"Unwanted Grace"

Jonah 3:10-4:11 & Matthew 20:1-16

September 18, 2005

Have you ever noticed that sometimes we just don't get it? Sometimes we just don't see the big picture? I read about a lady who was talking to a friend about the beauty of the universe and how impressive it is to think of how well God designed it all. This woman had one reservation, however. She said: "Frankly, I think God made one mistake - He should have put the moon in the day time sky and the Sun should have been out at night. After all, we already have plenty of light during the day."

Does God do anything that you don't like? - - - Have you ever thought about what kind of attributes you want in a God? It seems a strange question as I ask it. But the reality is that if we have ever given God much thought we have probably formulated some concepts of what we think God should be like. It would be an interesting exercise to take half an hour this afternoon and write down the attributes of God that you can think of and then check which you think are most important - prioritize them in terms of which you want and need most in God.

I thought about this when I was reading a little article about two people that were praying together. The first began to pray and in the prayer he said: "Lord, send us justice." But the second person immediately interrupted the prayer of the first to say: "No Lord, do not send justice - we wouldn't survive it - send us mercy!"

What do you expect in or from God? -- Do you want a God of justice or mercy - a God of grace and love or a God of judgement and laws? I am always struck by how limited our vocabulary is when it comes to God. The ancient Hebrews had many different names for God - each of which identified some of the attributes of God. When they wanted to talk about the grandeur and majesty of God they might use the name **El Elyon** because it talked about God as the '**MOST HIGH GOD**' - **the God who held heaven and earth in His hand - the possessor of heaven and earth**. Or they might say '**Elohim**' - which meant '**THE STRONG AND FAITHFUL ONE**'. Or - '**Adonai**' - '**THE SOVEREIGN MASTER**'. Or - '**Jehovah**', '**THE SELF-EXISTENT, ETERNAL GOD - THE GREAT "I AM"**'. Or a name made popular in a song not so long ago - '**El Shaddai**' - '**THE ALMIGHTY GOD - LIFE GIVER, SUSTAINER, NOURISHER**'. Who is the God that you turn to? What are the characteristic that you expect in God? Do you really want God to be all of the things that we speak of when we speak of God? Do you want God to be a God of unlimited love and grace?

I ask these questions in light of today's scriptures - because it seems that sometimes God does not do what we want or expect.

Jonah knows and understands God. In fact, he knows God all too well. Jonah knows that the nature of God is one of grace and forgiveness. And Jonah doesn't want God to be gracious and forgive. On the surface that sounds really strange but the fact is that very often we do not want God to be as gracious as we know He is. Jonah is sent against his will to Nineveh - the capital city of the nation that is Israel's sworn enemies. Jonah hates them - he wants them destroyed. But God is just too merciful for Jonah. The people repent and God forgives - and Jonah is mad.

The Gospel text is great - and it is frustrating - and if we really understand what it says, it will make us mad. Generally, we are too polite to say that anything in the Bible makes us mad - we just smile and try to make it into some sweet Christian pablum and ignore what it actually says. A land owner employs day laborers to help with the harvest. He tells them he will pay a days wage. Throughout the day he continues to find others who have not found employment for the day, so they are sent into the fields with the promise that they will be paid 'what is right'. "What is right", however, will be determined by the land owner - not the employees.

It seems that the people in Jesus day were really just like us. We have always been good bookkeepers. We learn from a very early age what is fair and when someone else has gotten just a little more than we have - and thus more than they deserve. Everything we do seems to be shaped by what is in it for us. If we work hard all day we expect more than anyone that has just been sitting around until late in the day. We expect fair treatment - meaning we worked longer, harder - we deserve more. "Lord, we pray, give us justice!" We know that we love it when God is merciful and gracious to us - but we don't want that grace to extend to someone who has not worked as hard as we have worked. But God prefers mercy - God acts in generosity to provide for all. Like that land owner, He provides work to do and what is needed to sustain all of us for the day. He is truly 'El Shaddai' - Life giver, Nourisher, Sustainer. The fact is that God isn't fair - not the way we count fairness - He is generous to a fault. It is wonderful when that generosity flows in our direction but we expect fairness for others.

Should God be gracious, - - generous, - - forgiving? Should that nature of God extend to all of God creation? Should that be our nature as we deal with other people?

Of course, the Gospel text is not about equal pay. It is not about working longer hours or anything like that. It is about the kingdom of God. It is about grace and love. In the text immediately preceding what is printed for us, the talk is about salvation - "Who can be saved?" And Peter says: 'what about us? We have given up everything to follow you.' We are the best Christians - we have gone to church religiously - we have done the most in the church. Don't we deserve special treatment - a little more than the rest. Don't we deserve a little more? Or perhaps we should say, don't some others deserve a little less? How can God possibly be gracious and generous to "those people"?

It doesn't seem hard to figure out - but if the sun or the moon are going to shine, they will shine for all people not just for some. If God is going to be fair - none of us could stand before His judgement seat. But God is generous in his grace and forgiveness. And that mercy flows out to us ... and to everyone - even those we might think do not deserve mercy.

A little poem that I like and is probably familiar to you says: "God has not promised skies always blue, flower-strewn pathways all our lives through; God has not promised sun without rain, joy without sorrow, peace without pain. -- But God has promised strength for the day, rest for the labor, light for the way, grace for the trials, help from above, unfailing sympathy - undying love." This God of our's is truly amazing in His grace and love. It shines down on all of us.

It is none of our business to question God's fairness. It is our business to note the great generosity that God has showered on each of us -- we are blessed beyond measure. God's generosity may be offensive to our bookkeeping system but all we can do is to be thankful and try to walk in His footsteps.

AMEN