

Bigots for the Lord? Take 2

September 20, 2026

Preaching Professor Fred Craddock once observed that there are two kinds of sermons that are difficult to hear: bad sermons and good sermons. I think we know what he meant by the former, but the latter? Sometimes a good sermon is the one that gets under your skin a little. Sometimes it bothers you. Sometimes it sends you home thinking about something you would rather not think about. There are weeks when a preacher almost hopes someone will come through the line after worship and say, “I really enjoyed that sermon, Pastor,” just so we can say, “Really? I was hoping it would bother you.”

Jesus is trying to bother us a little in Matthew 20.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard runs against something deeply ingrained in us: our instinctive sense of fairness. Workers hired at the beginning of the day agree to a full day’s wage. Others are hired later and later, right up until the last hour. When quitting time comes, everyone receives a full day’s pay and people who worked all day are furious.

The strange thing is that they weren’t cheated. They received exactly what they had been promised. Their anger comes from discovering that somebody else received the same thing they did but did less to receive it.

Scott Hoezee of Calvin Seminary points out how early we learn to keep score. Little children count the M&Ms in somebody else’s pile to make sure they received the same number. We grow up and stop counting M&Ms, but we don’t stop counting. We count salaries, opportunities, accomplishments, recognition, advantages and disadvantages.

There is a wonderful moment in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” when Sally is writing to Santa and produces an enormous list of things she wants. At the end she says, “If that’s too much to carry, just send cash.” When Charlie Brown is horrified by her greed, Sally indignantly responds, “All I want is my fair share. All I want is what I have coming to me.”

That sounds perfectly reasonable until Jesus tells this story. The workers aren’t angry because they were mistreated. They’re angry because someone else was treated generously.

That brings us to Jonah.

Many of us know the story: God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach. Jonah doesn’t want to go, so he runs away, gets on a boat, encounters a tremendous storm, gets thrown overboard and is swallowed by a great fish. After three days, the fish vomits him on dry land, and God gives him the assignment again. This time Jonah goes. He preaches. The Ninevites repent. God sees what they have done and decides not to destroy them.

And Jonah is furious.

He says, essentially, “This is exactly why I didn’t want to come here. I knew you were going to do this. I knew you were gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishment.”

Think about that.

Jonah ran away from God precisely because he knew what God was like. He knew God was merciful. He knew God was gracious. He knew God might forgive these people. He did not want them forgiven. We sometimes tell the Jonah story as though the point of the story is the giant fish. The real point is what happens when someone who knows the character of God discovers that God's mercy extends to people he cannot stand.

It's important, before we dismiss Jonah too quickly, to remember who the Ninevites were. Nineveh was part of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were responsible for the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They were brutal conquerors. They destroyed cities. They inflicted terrible suffering across the ancient Near East. Their kings even boasted about their violence.

Jonah had reasons to hate these people. What the Assyrians had done was genuinely horrible. Jonah wasn't angry because the Ninevites had been minding their own business and he simply decided he didn't like foreigners. These were people whose empire had inflicted tremendous suffering. Jonah wanted them to get what they had coming to them.

Sound familiar?

Jonah isn't simply a cartoon villain. He has reasons. But then, don't most bigots? They don't usually think of themselves as bigots. They have reasons. Those foreigners are dangerous. They're going to take our jobs. Those people are destroying our country. Those people are corrupting our children.

The details change. The human impulse doesn't.

The Book of Jonah is, among other things, a morality tale about what happens when our anger at other people becomes more important than our desire to resemble God. C. S. Lewis wrote about the danger of allowing love of country to become an idol. One warning sign, he suggested, is when our national or racial identity becomes more fundamental to us than our identity as people of faith. Another is when we whitewash the history of our own people while emphasizing the sins of others, allowing our sense of superiority to justify cruelty.

Jonah is caught in that trap. His loyalty to his own people has become more important than his loyalty to God. The irony is that Jonah knows God's character better than almost anyone in the story. He just doesn't like it. That may be one of the most honest things in the Bible.

There is another word that connects Jonah to Jesus' parable: bitterness. Jonah is bitter because God showed mercy to the Ninevites. The workers who labored all day are bitter because the landowner was generous to people who worked only an hour. Michael Chan, who teaches Old Testament at Luther Seminary, describes the human heart as clinging to bitterness "like a dog to a fleshy bone." Bitterness can take root so deeply that we would rather hold onto our anger than embrace mercy.

Both of these stories ask the same uncomfortable question: What happens when God's generosity exceeds our sense of what is fair? That doesn't mean Christian mercy requires us to pretend evil isn't evil. It doesn't mean abandoning accountability or refusing to protect people

from harm. Sometimes justice requires confrontation. But our faith asks us not to make our own desire for punishment the final word.

It is easy to spew venom at the venomous.

It is easy to fight fire with fire.

It is much harder to conform ourselves to the God who is “merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”

That is the point of Jonah’s strange ending. God doesn’t just pursue the Ninevites. God keeps pursuing Jonah. God stays with the bitter and unforgiving prophet. As Michael Chan puts it, God extends “mercy to the merciless and compassion to the one whose heart is set on wrath.” That’s actually the most important thing about Jonah. God’s mercy is not only for the people we think need mercy. It’s also for us when we are the people who need to learn mercy.

When Pat Robertson died three years ago, I saw people saying that they hoped he got what he deserved. Given the things Robertson had said and done over the course of his public life, I understood the anger behind those sentiments. Still, as I sat with Jonah and Matthew 20, I found myself imagining something different. There is a poem by someone named simply KC called “Ruminations on the Death of Pat Robertson” that imagines Robertson arriving in heaven and discovering that heaven is filled with precisely the people he had spent his life condemning. The poem imagines Divine in heaven reading in drag to children murdered at Sandy Hook and Uvalde. It imagines Edie Windsor and Gertrude Stein in heaven drinking coffee with Harvey Milk. It imagines Matthew Shepard in heaven beside a young man whose family never claimed his body after he died of AIDS. It imagines a heavenly dance party in which the victims of Pulse and Club Q vogue with the transgender women of color whose names were never known. Then the poem imagines Jesus putting an arm around Pat Robertson, draping his shoulders with a rainbow feather boa, looking around at all these people and saying, “Come, meet my disciples.”

It’s a profound theological image.

Because if heaven is simply the place where everybody finally gets what they deserve, then heaven is not much different from the vineyard as the workers understood it. But if heaven is the place where God’s grace finally has its way with all of us, then heaven is going to be full of surprises.

- People we never expected to see.
- People we thought God had surely rejected.
- People who have spent their lives resisting grace.
- Maybe even people who have spent their lives making grace harder for others to receive.

That is the scandal of God’s generosity. The workers hired at five o’clock get the same grace as the people who worked since dawn.

Nineveh receives mercy.

Jonah receives mercy, too.

The worker who is angry because the landowner is generous is invited to become generous himself. The prophet who wants vengeance is invited to discover compassion. Jesus keeps putting the question in front of us: What if God’s grace is bigger than our sense of fairness?

Our homework is pretty simple. We are called to become more like God and less like Jonah. More merciful. More generous. Slower to anger. Less obsessed with keeping score. That doesn't mean we stop caring about justice. It means we cannot allow justice to become an excuse for hatred. It means we must name evil without becoming consumed by it. It means we are called to resist bigotry without allowing it to make us bitter. Bitterness and bigotry are tempting. We will have reasons for them, sometimes even legitimate reasons.

But God keeps telling another story.

So perhaps our question is not simply, "Who deserves mercy?" Perhaps the more faithful question is, "What would happen if we became the kind of people who were generous with it?"

Friends, we talk regularly here about the idea that our faith compels us to make this world more like heaven on earth for others. Today's task is to work on modeling God's extravagant mercy and grace. After all, the day is getting late, and we have work to do.

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