

14th Sunday after Pentecost Year A
Sept. 18, 2011
St. Luke Sheboygan Falls
Jonah 3:10-4:11

Much more than Fair

Let us pray. God, your grace and mercy is wonderful. We are so grateful for the love and forgiveness you pour down upon us, even though we don't deserve it. Yet, it's hard for us to accept that others also receive more than they deserve. Lord, fill our hearts with your love so that we may see things your way. AMEN.

If I got a dollar every time I heard a child whine, "That isn't fair!" I would be rich. Might I suggest that most every one of us is born with an innate sense of fairness which when developed maturely is the foundation for equality and justice for all.

But, not always. Look at our friend, Jonah. God has given him the job of calling his worst enemies, the Ninevites to change their evil ways and turn back to God. This is not a task that Jonah wants to do. Instead, he takes off in the other direction. Jonah

wants God to do what's right and fair for him and for his people, Israel, but for the hated Ninevites, not so much. Jonah dreads speaking the words that give his enemies hope and lead them back to God. Why?

In Jonah's own words: ***"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."*** It's one thing when God showers goodness and mercy upon Jonah, Jonah's people, his friends, his relatives, but his enemies? The enemies of Israel? God is going too far. That just isn't fair?

In fact, God was being MORE than fair to Nineveh and THAT IS what Jonah didn't understand or approve of, as if humans have the right to approve of or disprove of what God does or doesn't do.

That's not our place. As in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard

when the vineyard owner chooses to pay the workers who only worked an hour the same as those who have worked all day long. When the workers dare to complain, the owner puts them in their place. ***“Am I not allowed to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I’m generous?”***

God’s grace is truly amazing. God forgives us and forgives us and forgives us, sometimes even the same dumb mistakes over and over again. It is a free gift and we don’t do anything to deserve it.

At times, that can be hard to accept. There HAS to be something to be done, somehow that I earn it. Something that makes me better or more deserving than that other person. That’s the only way I can feel okay with taking it, as some kind of reward for a job well done.

That’s not how God’s operates. We’re ALL SINNERS in God’s eyes and WE’RE ALL SAINTS set free not by any works we do, but by Christ’s death and resurrection. It is not our place to judge ANYONE as more or less deserving than us. That means ANYONE.

An astonishing example of this happened between a Minneapolis mother and the murderer of her only son. In February 1993, Mary Johnson’s 20 year old son was shot to death in an argument with Oshea Israel at a party. At that time, Mary wanted justice, *“He was an animal. He deserved to be caged.”*

A few years ago, Mary Johnson asked if she could meet Oshea Israel in prison. A devout Christian, she wanted to see if she could find it in herself to forgive this man.

"I believe the first thing she said to me was, 'Look, you don't know me. I don't know you. Let's just start with right now,'" Oshea says. "And I was befuddled myself."

Oshea says they met regularly after that. When he got out, she introduced him to her landlord - who with Mary's blessing, invited Oshea to move next door. Today they don't just live close - they are close.

Mary was able to forgive. She credits God, of course - but also concedes a more selfish motive.

"Unforgiveness is like cancer," Mary says. "It will eat you from the inside out. It's not about that other person, me forgiving him does not diminish what he's done. Yes, he murdered my son - but the forgiveness is for me. It's for me."

As for Oshea, he's still working on forgiving himself and trying to make a better life.

Mary Johnson's forgiveness is Christlike. None of us could ever attain to it without the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and yet, every single one of us received that astonishing, unlimited mercy and love when Christ gave his life for us on the cross.

But can we, do we also offer that mercy to others who hurt us, sometimes in the very worst way? Or do we, like Jonah, resent the generosity of God to those who are different than us, those who wrong us? As freeing as it feels to be forgiven, I get the sense from Mary Johnson who let go of the hate that she felt for her son's killer that it is just as freeing and life giving to forgive.

Today I'd like to close with a blog post from a young mom who remembers

her eight year old's reaction ten years ago

on Sept. 11, 2001: