

“Generosity Run Amok”  
September 24, 2023  
Scripture: Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

Does it bother you when good things happen to people you don't think deserve it? Or to people who objectively don't deserve it? Those people exist out there, too. If it bothers you, then you may be able to relate to Jonah. Why wouldn't he feel that way? Jonah was commanded to preach a message of repentance to the enemy, which he was probably happy to do, but also to warn them of what was coming. By being warned they were given a chance to change in the hope that God's wrath might be abated. Did they know God the way Jonah did? Probably not. Their idea of god was probably more transactional. You do certain things and the gods are obligated to respond. Trying to force the God of Israel into that kind of transactional relationship is one of the longest-standing arguments in scripture.

But Jonah understood God differently. It's not that he believed God would be obligated if the people repented. What Jonah knew was God looks for any excuse to be merciful. You can almost hear the resentment and sarcasm in his voice when he says, “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.” Usually that description of God is part of a song of praise and rejoicing, but for Jonah it's offensive; it's despicable.

Jonah does not want these people forgiven, and with good reason. Nineveh is the capital city of Assyria, the hated enemy of Israel that will eventually swallow Israel up as it expands its empire. Jonah wants these people destroyed not saved. And he must wonder what kind of a God he's dealing with that would have him give such horrible people a chance to repent and be spared. So, his anger really is understandable, or should be from our point of view. Jonah's story is a parable from Jewish scripture; it's not an historical account. I doubt there was ever a moment when the people Assyria reflected on their behavior and felt remorse for the violence they unleashed on their neighbors. But this story offers an insight into the nature of God, which is the purpose of parables.

We're met here by a God who is willing, even eager, to be generous toward people who do not deserve it. A God whose generosity has run amok. This is probably a very old, old story that may have been popularized during a time in Israel's life when that conception of God was being suppressed. After the exiled people returned from Babylon and began rebuilding their society a movement developed to purify the population by expelling foreigners and even breaking up families. In their desire to be secure, they closed in on themselves and promoted an understanding of God that was exclusive to Israel. Stories like Jonah and Ruth were a way to challenge that tendency. You may remember Ruth is a Moabite woman who becomes the great grandmother of David. They were stories that broadened God's influence and concern in the world beyond just the fate of Israel. In effect they argued God is for the whole world and can't be contained in the life of Israel.

That kind of generosity, a generosity that is unconcerned with merit or history or ethnic heritage or status, is a form of generosity we find hard to embrace. That kind of generosity

refuses to make distinctions between deserving and undeserving. That kind of generosity is uncontrollable. What kind of a world would it be if people actually behaved that way?

That's the question Jesus asks through the stories he tells. "Imagine the kingdom of heaven like this," he says. The story he tells that we just heard has been debated up, down and sideways for centuries. Is he describing the way the world ought to be? Is it just pure fantasy? Is Jesus advocating some kind of socialist paradise? Or is this just another example of wild hyperbole meant to set us off balance? In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine explores all these possibilities in her chapter on this parable. She points out how older interpreters took it to mean the later workers represent Gentiles who are now as accepted as their Jewish counterparts in God's kingdom in spite of the resentment they face. There's also a stream of interpretation that sees the landowner as an unjust owner of capital who is controlling the workers by manipulating them into being in conflict with one another. Neither of those interpretations really pays attention to what the parable actually says, though.

The world Jesus seems to want his hearers to discover is one where generosity is the key to creating relationships of justice and compassion. Is the landowner's generosity really that far-fetched? Is the practice of paying everyone the same wage no matter how long they worked a recipe for disaster and discontent? The other day I heard an interview on NPR with Rory Stewart, a former member of the British Parliament who is now the global ambassador for the charity Give Directly. He said currently 700 million people in the world are unable to meet daily needs financially. The philosophy of Give Directly, rather than having people go to those countries and volunteer or create agencies to administer programmes for people living in poverty, is to give them cash directly and trust them to use it as they need to. It's an approach that many of us would consider unwise but it's proven to be effective. When people are given the resources they need and are trusted to rely on their own judgment it's found that most know what to do to succeed.

In her book Levine points a number of examples where Jewish tradition and history bear out the wisdom of Jesus' description of how economics could work if generosity was the bottom line and not just productivity and profit. But to really embrace that model, we have to find ways to overcome our own feelings of resentment and disappointment. In her book *The Sum of Us*, economist Heather McGee uses the example of public swimming pools to illustrate how damaging that resentment can be. In the post-war years many communities built public swimming facilities that were huge and beautiful and could accommodate hundreds of people. But in the south and in many northern communities they were restricted for white people only. When Black people began to sue to have access to the public pools their taxes helped to build and won, many of those communities simply filled them in rather than integrate. So, everyone would suffer to avoid sharing something good with people considered undeserving. In a world built on bigotry and hatred, any act of generosity or justice is considered dangerous.

Like Jonah, when those communities were told to integrate, they sat and pouted rather than rejoice over the justice shown their neighbors. Jonah's story gives us some insight into God's feelings about that response. God isn't angry with Jonah so much as baffled by him. Why would anyone who has experienced God's goodness begrudge others experiencing it too? Or, as Jesus might say, "are you envious because I am generous?" And if we believe God is generous

why would we want to suffocate that generosity within ourselves? The model of behavior, of employer-worker relations Jesus describes is a reflection of the generosity God lavishes on the world. A world where generosity is allowed to run amok is what the kingdom of heaven is like. And it's not beyond our abilities to imagine or manifest.

I think we often equate Jesus' parables with fairy tales. We treat them like quaint little stories good for putting our children to sleep but not very meaningful for our actual lives. But that's not why he told them. His intention was to help his hearers, including us, to envision an alternative to the world we've created for ourselves. After all, we are responsible for the nature of our relationships with one another. If God's wild generosity is to be known in the world, it's up to us to practice it. That means giving up our resentments and anger and disappointments and learning to rejoice in compassion and justice and love. We aren't meant to be observers like Jonah, sitting on the sidelines pouting. God is calling us to participate, to become partners with God in healing injustice and despair. If we want generosity to run amok in the world, then we have to let it run wild in us.

God's kingdom is bursting at the seams, waiting to be revealed. And it's within our grasp if we're willing to set aside our fears and allow generosity to flow through us and bring new hope to the world.

Amen