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“The Good Unfairness of God” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman
(9/24/2023, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost)

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Let us pray. Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. Oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen. The Old Testament reading for today, the first reading that you heard Debbie read was from the book of Jonah. Now when I say the book of Jonah, what is the first thing that comes to mind? Whale or fish? Yes, well done. Yes. So that illustrates something that is true about Bible stories that if you want people to forget a really difficult and problematic story, just to add an animal the story of Jesus's birth, you know, poverty, exploitation, long journey, Mary does not get her birth plan. Jesus is in a feeding trough. It's awful. Nobody takes them in. But there's an ox and a lamb and a cow and it gets great. That's when we remember the story of Noah's Ark. I went serve a church that had a preschool called Noah's Ark. That's actually a common thing. I've seen them all over the country, because it's got giraffes and lions and hippos. Do you know everybody dies? In that story, except for one family, also, have you read this? Like, no part two, like what happens right after he gets into the alcohol production business, and gets too much into his own supply? Read the Bible people. It's all in there. But we forget about that. And the Jonah story as well. Turns out, Jonah, is a real so and so. But we forget because there's a fish and fish isn't cute enough. So we call it a whale, not in the text. But we love big swimming mammals. So we just change it a little bit. But Jonah, he's kind of the worst. God tells him go to Nineveh. There's a bunch of people there that are lost in their sins. I want you go rescue them go preach the message. And he says no. And that's when he gets swallowed by the fish and all that. So now at the end of the story, what you heard today, which you may not remember, because you got so distracted by the whale. In the end of the story, everybody in Nineveh repents. It's the biggest survival of all time. And Jonah is angry. Because here's the thing about Jonah. He, like many of us, wants one thing. And that's for people to get what they deserve. Jonah wants people to get what they have coming to them. The reason I know that this is a common human experience is because there is a whole genre of songs

about this fact, they're called breakup songs. But whether it's Nancy Sinatra's these boots are made for walking and they will walk all over you. Or if it's Dylan, Bob Dylan's Like a Rolling Stone. How does it feel to be on your own without a home like it's such an angry song. And he wants her to get what she deserves. And then more recently, Beyonce Single Ladies, if you like it, you should have put a ring on it. Right? This is the liturgical movement for Beyonce songs. And then, more recently, Olivia Rodrigo, barely, not even 20 years old, has the best album of 2023. So far in called guts, and in it, she has a song called Get him back, where she she's broken up with somebody and she wants to get him back. And she wants to say she says, I want to kiss his face with an uppercut. I want to I want to meet his mom. And tell her her son's the worst. This is the kind of thing she wants to key his car. When someone has hurt you. You want them to get what they deserve. You want them to be hurt, like you have been hurt. This is what human beings are like. This sense of fairness dominates so many things in our brain. Yeah, I'm about to make some statements that are not political, and they're not partisan. It's just it's something where I hear the language of fairness a lot. When people talk about foreign aid going to other countries that don't deserve it. There's this kind of idea of what's fair and what's not fair. Like have they been good or bad countries. There's the considering the conversations nationally about affirmative action, it's all about it's not fair for these people to get this or it's all about fairness. presidential pardons whatever party when someone leaves office, there's a bunch of Pardons and a lot of people saying it's not fair. A lot of conversation about who gets what help from the government. These people it's okay, but these people don't deserve it. It's not fair. still hear anybody want to leave? I'm just checking okay. Again, I bring this up just to say that this question of fairness lives in our Our brain and it's how we see a lot of things in the world. We're keeping score who deserves things who doesn't deserve things. And I gotta say, I'm the same way. I can relate to Jonah wanting people to get what they deserve. Because yesterday I drove on i 35. And there I am stuck in the left lane behind somebody's going, can you believe it? The speed limit? Let me tell you, if that's you, may God have mercy on your soul. Because it's a minimum of 85 in the left lane. That's just how it is. But so there I am stuck behind a semi that's going in my mind slow, and I can't pass and so I'm there and I'm feeling angry. And then there's a guy tailgating me. So close, I can read the VIN, like on his windshield, the tiny print. And so there he is, and I have this moment where I want to slam on my brakes, just so he gets what he deserves. Yes, I would also die in this situation. But man, he would learn a lesson. So this is what Jonah says, like he says, I'm angry enough to die. I am so mad that those Ninevites were forgiven and gone off the hook because they didn't get what they deserve. What kind of world what kind of moral universe we live in, if people get off the hook, if people get stuff they don't deserve. People get stuff and it's not fair.

Well, we've picked the wrong religion. If that's the mindset we want to have. I mean, I'm as mad as you are. I want people to get what they deserve. Except for me,

but other people, I definitely want them to get what they deserve. But here's the thing, you can argue about fairness, and you can want that in the world. And you can talk about who deserves and who doesn't deserve and you can talk about all that stuff. But you can't base it on the New Testament. Because of the annoying problem of Matthew chapter 20. Several other stories as well, but this one man, it really kind of lays it on thick. In this story, you have this wealthy landowner who has a large vineyard, and apparently it's harvest time. And so he goes to hire workers, he goes out into the marketplace and finds the day laborers and says who would like to sign up for a day of backbreaking landscaping and agricultural work? And some people sign up and he says, Okay, I'll pay you the daily wage. And they start working. That's about 6am. About 9am, he goes back out, finds more people standing in the marketplace looking for work, and he says, Okay, you guys come to and I'll pay you what's right. So they start working. On his way to lunch, he sees more people standing in the marketplace, and he calls them into service as well. He does it again at 3pm. And then he's forgotten something on his home depot run and at 5pm. He goes back out, and he sees more people standing. And he says y'all come to they work for maybe an hour, it's end of the day now time to pay up. And he calls them to the little manager table and they're gonna get their paycheck for the day. And the people who worked for that last hour of the day come up first. And they get paid a whole day's wage. They get that denarius that coin that was the day laborers wage. And so you can quite understand the people at the back of the line the folks who had worked 12 hours that day. Seeing those guys for one hour get a whole day's wage, it denarius for an hour of work. Wait till we get to the front of the line. Those guys barely broke a sweat. We're covered in grape juice and dust we're gonna get overtime. So they get to the front of the line and they get a day's wage. They get that same denarius. Everyone gets the same whether they worked one hour or 12. And they are not happy. These long suffering laborers. Not necessarily at their own wage. That's what they agreed for, but that the manager would give to the others who did jack squat that he would give them the same. The manager says Why are you mad? You got a fair wage. You're mad that I'm generous with others I can do with my wealth what I want I want to give it away. In case you didn't pick up on it, the landowner is God. I know shocking We are the laborers in the vineyard. And this story shows us two really important things about God. And by the way, it's amazing to me it's it's like the Holy Spirit is a real thing because Kara preached at the 730, and the 910. And her sermon and my sermon like are like this, because and I highly recommend that you listen to her word on the podcast when it comes out. Because it was fantastic. This story, as Kara said, and as I'm saying to you is not about us. The story is about God. And this tells us two really important things about who God is what's God's

heart. The first thing is that God wants as many people in the vineyard as possible. A wealthy landowner would have already had an extensive grounds crew to do the work of the vineyard, you don't plant you can't plan a huge vineyard without a ton of people, you can't manage a huge vineyard, it's constant work. My dad owns a vineyard, it's isn't, you know, retirement crisis. It's so much work, he would have already had people and yet he wants even more, so much that he goes out at six at nine at noon at three and a five to just get more people in, he wants more and more people. And it's not like, you know, these folks were knocking on his door, presenting their resume, and their extensive references for vineyard experience. He goes out to find them. So this is the second point, it was all about grace from the beginning. There's all this talk sometimes about you know, I found God and, and I get that I get that's how it feels. But as this story shows us, it's God who goes out and finds us and brings us in. So he wants as many people in as possible. And it was always about grace from the beginning. When they get paid, we find out that the pay never really had anything to do with their work. He was just gonna give everybody the whole amount. It has nothing to do with your work. It has everything to do with the generosity of the landowner. This is what God looks like. God wants His many people in it, it was always about grace from the beginning. Because God, thanks be to God is not fair. But God is gracious. Fairness really only works when you look at yourself with blinders. Because if you got what you deserved, you have to consider your own pettiness, your own cruelty, your own self absorption. And I don't say this just because I know each of you that well. Some of you I could give examples, but you know, but I know myself. You know, I put these things on the fool y'all. But human beings, we are a mixed bag at best. And if we got we deserved, we would be toast. Here's what this means for you. Some of you have been in the vineyard since six in the morning. Some of you are at church every time the doors are open. Some of you know the difference between first and second Kings in First and Second Chronicles. Some of you could give me a really good description of Trinitarian theology and church history. Some of you serve on committees here, some of you serve on multiple committees here you are laboring in the vineyard, and you've been there since six in the morning, and thanks to God for your service. Some of you just got here. Some of you just started paying attention to this part of the sermon. You've been checked out. I don't know. Some of you were here under duress. You know, somebody in your family was like today, you're going okay. But you're here. So some of you are the 6am people, some of you the 5pm people. Some of you are more like 5:59pm people. But you're here, you're in. And in Christ, God has forgiven the sins of the whole world. Everybody is paid that daily wage, the eternal life that starts now of belovedness and acceptance in God. It's the gospel, no one gets what they deserve. That's the big announcement here at your local neighborhood forgiveness distribution center, Your sins are forgiven, and it's for everybody. This is who God is. And that's really all I want to say, except for this one final PS. Because this passage does reveal a third

thing about God. And it comes about when you ask the question, How is this even possible? How could God be such a bad manager? It's such an inefficient business person here. You know. We want a world that's well run we sort of want us sense of justice, that fairness desire, we have like there's a good part of that, like we want the bad things in the world to be addressed. The only problem is that also means we have to be addressed. So how does this work? This God who pays people too much? Well, the hint is in that over payment, because see if these these people who worked one hour they should have gotten a fraction of 12 of that wage. And he pays them the whole amount. He overpays that extra payment comes from his own cash, his own reserves. He is way overpaying, his overhead is high. And he is bearing the cost himself as he does that his generosity means he's giving it all away from his own storehouse. And this is the thing we learn about God. This is the heart of God. God wants you in so badly that he will give from his own self for you. And we know this because we know who's telling the story, Jesus Christ, and we know what he's about to go do, which is to make a beeline for a hill outside of Jerusalem to give himself up. So through His death and resurrection, you would know that this forgiveness of God that I've talked about all morning that seems like this theological abstraction is real and true. And for you, Jesus, showing us the heart of God

to give all for you, that you could know that you're in and you receive the full day's wage, whether you've been working from 6am or whether you just got here. It's all for you. Because thanks be to God. He is not fair. But he is good. Amen.

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