

Beyond Fair
Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16
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Last year, I was in a weekly class on spiritual practices from a variety of religious contexts. Each week, we were given a theme, along with applicable practices: themes such as gratitude, compassion, mindfulness, Sabbath, empathy, joy, patience; practices that included many types of meditation, prayer, writing, art, collage, music, acts of kindness. The final week of the class at the end of May -- keep in mind we started at the beginning of September and met every week -- the final week of the class at the end of May the topic was “rejoicing in the good fortune of others,” and the practice was *Mudita* – a Buddhist term meaning the cultivation of “altruistic joy,” which is the polar opposite of envy. Before the class, I never knew there was a single word (albeit in another language) for delighting in other people’s success and well-being.

I did not think it was coincidental or haphazard planning that led the instructor to choose this as the final spiritual practice upon which we were to embark. I guess she knew that it would entail a year of prepping with all the other spiritual practices as foundation for us to be able to truly incorporate this one.

When we consider the two Biblical texts read today, we hear a common theme of resentment and envy. Jonah is angry that God has changed his mind about destroying the city of Ninevah, for after hearing Jonah’s message of impending doom, the entire city repents. Jonah knows that God is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and though he wants these benefits for himself, he doesn’t want them to pertain to the Ninevites. For one, he is likely ashamed that he appears to now be a false prophet, for his prophecy of destruction is not fulfilled. He is angry not only because of this, but also because he wants the Ninevites punished, not forgiven. Ninevah wasn’t just any evil city – it was the capital of Assyria, the ruthless empire that would obliterate the kingdom of Israel within decades of Jonah’s saving mission. Jonah wants the Ninevites to receive what he believes they are due.

It is in that same vein of wanting people to receive their just rewards that we reflect on the New Testament passage. The landowner goes into the marketplace first thing in the morning to hire the day laborers and says he will pay them whatever is right. He returns at noon and 3 and 5 to hire more laborers, and at the end of the day, pays them all the same. The day laborers who have toiled all day are angry that those who worked a fraction of the day receive the exact same pay. They grumble to the landowner because they expected more than the daily wage -- those who worked just an hour were not only paid first, but were paid equal to those who worked the entire day.

Biblical scholar David Lose writes that it is “through our own insecurity and lack of trust that we come to understand and assess our lives not through the

abundance we have been given by God but instead by what we feel we still lack. Because of this gnawing sense of deficiency, we define ourselves over and against others, comparing and begrudging their good fortune because it wasn't *our* good fortune. Think for a moment, of what this does to the grumbling day laborers. Rather than feeling fortunate to have found work for the day, they feel unfortunate at not having received more. Rather than rejoicing that the workers who waited all day for the prospect of work can now return home blessed to be able to feed their families, they can only begrudge them, perhaps even curse them, their good fortune. And rather than be grateful to the landowner who has given them an honest day's wage for an honest day's work, they can only grumble with resentment. When we look at our lives, do we count our blessings or our misfortunes? Do we pay attention to the areas of plenty in our lives or what we perceive we lack? Do we live by gratitude or envy? Do we look to others in solidarity and compassion or see them only as competition? The thing about this choice is that it really is a *choice* -- you can't be grateful and envious at the same time. So which is it going to be?

Ann Cushman, a local spiritual leader and co-director of Spirit Rock here in Marin, writes, "Responding to the good fortune of others with envy is a natural, though not admirable, human characteristic. It's as if we're hardwired to believe that there's only so much happiness to go around and that if someone else gets too big a chunk of it, there won't be any left for us.

It's not difficult to see this (what she calls) "habit" in ourselves and others. When your lover has just dumped you, probably the last thing you want to do is go to a wedding. She tells of a long-time yogi who shares how hard it is to look around a yoga class and see younger practitioners melting effortlessly into poses that elude him. And writer Anne Lamott describes her difficulty dealing with the triumphs of other writers, particularly if one of them happens to be a friend. She says, 'It can wreak just the tiniest bit of havoc with your self-esteem to find that you are hoping for small, bad things to happen to this friend, like, for her head to blow up.'

In my final spirituality class, we were asked to reflect on our battles with envy, and my professor started us off with telling of her envy of friends who have children at colleges close to home, while her daughter is at school across the country. (I could now inform her now, with my depth and wisdom gained these last 5 days since taking my son to college, that it is not about the distance, it is about the universal changing of seasons). I spoke about the email I received from the seminary, stating that incoming students will now need only 72 instead of 81 required credits to graduate and will have summer classes included in spring tuition rather than having to pay thousands of dollars out-of-pocket, as I did.

I talked about my fear of the then impending "awards" for graduation, and how I didn't want to sit stewing with envy in my graduation seat as all the people received their awards. Though I have recently been affirmed for ordination (just

two days ago), I honestly thought, as I learned of the ordinations of some of my colleagues from other denominations, that the decision would likely be for me no, if only so that I could truly grasp this message of having joy for others, regardless of my own circumstances. When others receive God's mercy, our inclination is to focus on what we perceive as our deprivation.

We identify with the laborers who started first and worked all day, just as we identify with Jonah who doesn't want to be called a fool for his false prophecy and see his enemies saved. God makes a point through Jonah's compassion for the withering tree, of God's own compassion not only for the repentant Ninevites but the disobedient Jonah himself. The landowner showing generosity and mercy for the late-coming workers implies that we, too, are meant to be compassionate, merciful and generous. Yes. Indeed. And perhaps we are also meant to identify with those late-coming workers who are blessed with more than they appear to deserve.

One biblical commentator (Anthony Cereski) notes that the Jonah story shows a development in the divine judgment perspective where God's mercy is granted over God's judgment. This perspective is likely a reaction to the separatist and exclusivist tendencies of the Ezra and Nehemiah period, dating the book of Jonah to exilic or post-exilic times (5th c BCE or later). The "universalism" implicit in the book of Jonah is that God's grace is extended to all. Just as God does not desert Jonah for his disobedience, God does not desert an enemy city like Nineveh. It is interesting that if we look to the entirety of the book of Jonah, that every other character in the book shows more deliberate obedience to God than the prophet himself – the pagans who overthrow him on the ship and then call on this foreign God, the whale who spits him out at God's command, the Ninevites who repent after Jonah's prophecy of destruction. Jonah feels entitled to God's mercy and God continues to extend it even in Jonah's ironic disobedience, thinking that God is being unreasonable. God is patient with Jonah, holding out hope for him, even as Jonah thinks God is not being fair. This is a God who is beyond fair, a God of second chances, a God who never stops pursuing, a God who holds out hope for us, a patient God who uses whatever means necessary to individually teach us and show us the depth of care God has for us. For all of us.

Just as God embraces Nineveh as well as Jonah, in the parable of the workers, the least and the last are elevated as the landowner shows generosity to those who only work for one hour. It is a generosity that doesn't make sense to us. It doesn't seem fair. Sure, we can say we know that God loves all people, but the parable of the workers in the vineyard along with Jonah who complains about God's love for Nineveh, remind us that God somehow has a special love even for those whom we normally exclude, reject, begrudge, or even hate. It's not fair; it's beyond fair. This divine grace that welcomes Nineveh and this divine economy of love that pays a full day's wage for one hour of work confuse our tight-fisted and frugal inclinations which implore us to complain about rather than celebrate

divine generosity. The landowner says, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?”

Lectionary essayist Dan Clendenin says, “The Jesus Way is a world of grace and not merit, status reversal instead of status reverence, undeserved generosity rather than pay for services rendered. When we understand that this is the love God has for each of us, universally, when we know that someone else appearing to be receiving more doesn’t take away a smidgen from what God has for us, perhaps then we can begin to experience abundant joy and extend it to others.

Envy is not an expression of our truest and deepest nature, but a competitive reflex, a habit, which can yield to a more satisfying way of being. The practice of *mudita*, rejoicing in the success of others, cultivates what is already an innate quality within us – the ability to access the fountain of infinite joy that is available to each of us at all times, regardless of our circumstances. Just as we can be miserable in a hammock on a Caribbean beach, we can be late for work and stuck in a traffic jam on 101, overflowing with bliss. When we develop the capacity to accept God’s grace that is offered to us over and over, God’s grace that is offered to us early in the morning and late in the day, God’s grace that is offered to us whether we’ve run away or stayed the straight course, when we accept God’s grace, we begin to savor life’s blessings whether they are showered upon us or others. The more secure we become in our acceptance of and gratitude for God’s grace in our own lives, the easier it becomes to delight in the joy of other people as well.

There is a saying, “compare equals despair.” Instead of comparing our experiences with the imagined ecstasies of others, as we become more appreciative of our own blessings, the joys of other people, instead of being a threat, naturally start to feed our hearts as well.

Pastor Jason Lathrop recommends 3 steps to combat envy. The first is to identify when envy arises. The second is to encourage the target of the envy privately, and the third is to praise them publicly. Recently, once again, I had the opportunity to practice what I preach. I was aware that I was harboring envy and resentment towards a colleague who seemed to be breezing through the presbytery process while mine seemed to be extended and delayed these past 6 months. I called the colleague, extended my congratulations, and found, remarkably, that as I spoke, my heart opened up and it was absolutely genuine. As my colleague revealed vulnerability and insecurities, my sense of competition miraculously turned into a sense of compassion and solidarity. Enthusiasm grew as we spoke, and I realized the blessing and joy of having an ally rather than an adversary. And it became clear that the decision rested with me.

I invite you to open your palms, and in the left, to imagine a resentment, a grudge you are holding or an envy you have for someone in particular. Be honest. And in your right palm, imagine a blessing, something for which you are grateful in your life. And now choose which one you want to continue to carry. And that

one, which I hope is in your right palm, that one you want to keep, you can place on your heart. The other, you can offer up to God to take from you, to transform it into something beautiful, something full of joy.

Please join me in prayer: God, thank you for this blessing you have bestowed upon me that I accept with a full heart. Please take this burden of envy from me and transform it into something beautiful. Help me to stop worrying about who is above me and who is below me. Remove the desire for rankings and competitions from my heart. Be with me as I attempt to be at Peace with who I am and the knowledge that who I am is loved by You. Amen.