

**“Green Eggs and Ham”**  
**Jonah 3:10-4:11**  
**Matthew 20:1-16**

Here's a couple of parables that rub us the wrong way. Maybe we feel like Dr. Seuss did towards green eggs and ham.

I will not like them here or there.  
I will not like them anywhere.  
I will not like them Sam I am.  
I will not like Green Eggs and Ham.

What is it that we liken to green eggs and ham? The grace of God! “That’s preposterous,” you say. “Why would we find God’s grace offensive?” Well, we don’t, if we are the recipient. But when God’s grace is poured out on others, especially those who don’t deserve it, our sense of fair play is violated. We prefer justice for others and mercy for ourselves.

Jonah was one of the most successful preachers I know. He spoke and the people jumped! He spoke a word of judgment against Assyria, one of Israel’s enemies. If they did not change their ways, God would zap them. The people listened and they changed their ways and God was merciful toward them. Jonah was incensed. **“I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”** Jonah would rather be dead than see God love Israel’s enemy.

The parable of Jesus is very clear. It violates all good capitalistic principles such as, “the harder you work, the more you earn.” This past week marked the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the enthronement of the Sultan of Brunei. He is a multi-billionaire. Although his wealth is less than half that of Bill Gates, he is 36 times more wealthy than Queen Elizabeth of England, making him the wealthiest member of royalty.<sup>i</sup> Some years ago he attended a conference on the island of Cyprus. Before he checked out of the hotel, he left a bag of 1700 \$100 bills as a tip for the hotel staff. The manager of the hotel decided to divide the money equally among all of its 320 employees, so each worker received \$531.<sup>ii</sup> You should have heard the grumbling. “She was on vacation the whole time he was here.” “He didn’t even lift a suitcase for the Sultan.” “I answered more room service calls than anyone!” Etc.

We would be more in favor of the distribution system developed by Bob Thompson who sold his road construction company for \$442 million.<sup>iii</sup> It was a company he founded 40 years earlier with only \$3500. What a return on his investment! To express his profound gratitude to his employees, he gave each of the salaried employees at least \$1 million, and each hourly employee \$2,000 for every year with the company. In all, he gave his 550 employees \$128 million.

While that sounds both gracious and fair, I bet there was a lot of grumbling among some of the

workers, at least under their breath. Some probably would have preferred the more equal distribution of the hotel manager. "It's not fair that a foreman should receive \$1 million and me only \$12,000. I may have only been with the company for six years, but I was just as important to its success as he was." I have no doubt that's true. But that's the way it is. Didn't Mr. Thompson have a right to do with his money as he chose?

There's a verse of scripture that says we should **"Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep."**<sup>iv</sup> We're pretty good at weeping with those who weep, but we often have a hard time rejoicing with those who rejoice – especially if they have something we don't, and it's something we want and think we deserve.

Deserve – that's the operative word in today's scriptures. Jonah's enemies *deserved* God's ultimate punishment. Those who labored in the vineyard all day in the heat of the sun *deserved* to be paid more than those who didn't punch the clock until 5:00. **"Is it right for you to be angry?"** God asked Jonah. **"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?"** asked the landowner of the grumbling workers.

As a matter of fact, we do get angry. We do get jealous. God's grace is offensive because it violates our sense of justice. We want our just desserts. We cry foul when others, undeservedly, seem to eat just dessert, that is, they never seem to suffer, and everything they touch turns to gold, even though they do not honor God, even though they spurn God's ways.

We used to live across the street from a family that never went to church, probably didn't even know where one was. But prosper? O, my, did they ever! Nice folk? You couldn't find better neighbors. Paul worked hard and played hard. He and his wife and two sons did a lot together as a family, probably more than I did with mine. He was always busy in the garage restoring his sports car. Many week-ends the family would go off to watch Dad race the car. All the time he was working in the garage, his wife was there, cheering him on. She even helped him cut the grass. I also remember how Paul drank beer like I drink water, but I never saw him inebriated or fail to show respect to everyone. Neat people. But when I would come home from church early Sunday afternoon, drained from leading two worship services and a lot of other things, I got a little jealous when I saw the Richardson's drive up in their big motor home, all refreshed from a week-end away. "Where, O God, is there any justice," I would say to myself.

Even the Psalmist prayed, **"God is indeed good ... but I had nearly lost confidence; my faith was almost gone because I was jealous of the proud when I saw that things go well for the wicked. They do not suffer pain; they are strong and healthy. They do not suffer as other people do; they do not have the troubles that others have. And so they wear pride like a necklace and violence like a robe..."**<sup>v</sup>

We hear good news when the Bible tells us, **"it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith."** But we get more than a little uptight when it goes on to say, **"[salvation] is not**

**the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it.”<sup>vi</sup>**

Deep down, we like to boast. We like the idea of being rewarded by God for being good. We even like better the idea that those who are bad will be punished. Sometimes we boast about being a Christian. We feel at least a little bit better than others. Surely we'll be rewarded for taking on the name of Jesus.

We'd like to live in a world where everyone got what they deserved. Or would we? Some years ago, Gerald Sittser, a professor of history at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington, was involved in an auto accident that took the lives of his mother, his wife and his four year old daughter. He said that he wanted the driver of the other car, the cause of the accident, to be prosecuted, not out of vengeance, but as a matter of justice so that he would pay a penalty. To add insult to injury, the man got off on a legal technicality. Sittser writes,

We demand to live in a society in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished, hard work succeeds and laziness fails, decency wins and meanness loses. We feel violated when life does not turn out that way, when we get what we do not deserve and do not get what we feel we do deserve.

I was enraged after the trial, which in my mind turned out to be as unjust as the accident itself. The driver did not get what he deserved any more than the victims ... The travesty of the trial became a symbol for the unfairness of the accident itself. I had to work hard to fight off cynicism.

Yet over time I began to be bothered by this assumption that I had a right to complete fairness. Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place ... Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths; but I did not deserve their presence in my life either. On the face of it, living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such a world I might never experience tragedy; but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of the three wonderful people whom I lost.

The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world, for grace is *grace only when it is undeserved*. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering.<sup>vii</sup>

Speaking of green eggs and ham, there's a story about a northerner who was traveling through the South. One morning he stopped for breakfast in a small country restaurant. He ordered coffee, eggs, sausage, toast and juice. When his plate arrived he noticed a pile of grey, lumpy stuff in

the corner of his plate. Confused, he called the waitress over to his table, and inquired what the stuff was. "Why sir," she responded, "them's grits." "But I didn't order them," he informed her. With a big smile, the waitress reassured him, "Sir, you don't order grits. They just come!"

So, too, with God's grace. It just comes. The only thing that blinds us to it or makes it look like "grey, lumpy stuff" is our insistence that life be fair. We often talk about fair wages, about just desserts. God talks only about long-suffering, redeeming love. Love cannot be apportioned out like some commodity. Real love can never be a reward. It can never be deserved. None of us needs a mother or a father who play favorites with their children. God is a very good parent, a very good parent.

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- i. Forbes.Com, September 16, 2007
  - ii. *New York Times*, October 29, 2007
  - iii. *New York Times*, August 1, 1999
  - iv. Romans 12:15
  - v. Psalm 73, 1-6, *Good News Bible*
  - vi. Ephesians 2:8-9
  - vii. *Christian Century*, January 17, 1996