Both of the stories in our scripture readings are delightful on a few levels. I find Jonah in the first reading, and the laborers in the Gospel who are grumbling about their wages, very endearing. They remind me of my grumblings as a child growing up in a large family. More to the point of the scriptural message, the story of God’s extraordinary mercy and goodness to all of creation – not just limited to humans – leaves us with great hope for ourselves and our planet. And third, in the story of Jonah, God speaks very plainly to Jonah. Not in a patronizing way but kindly and allowing. God patiently stays with the annoyed, and likely confused Jonah as he slowly wrestles with a very large question: Is there any living creature or thing on this earth that falls outside of God’s mercy and goodness?

Growing up in a household of seven kids I didn’t talk much but did a lot of watching. Lots going on in a household of nine. There’s a conversation I vividly remember I used to have with my father. Short conversation. It went like this. “But it’s not fair that my brother or sister got this or that; or gets to do this or that.” My father’s constant refrain was: “Life is not fair.” Kindly but firmly. End of discussion. That never satisfied me – I would end up in a sulk, annoyed.

Jonah in our reading today is in a big sulk. He just doesn’t like God’s largesse. The prophet feels that God is too merciful too gracious, too good to Israel’s great enemy, Ninevah.

This sense of fairness when it comes to what we get in comparison to what other get is not an unusual feeling. I bet you remember the chorus of “It’s not fair.” That fairness sensibility can be a good thing because often it may change, as we get older, into a sense of justice and care for those who are suffering injustice, or are hungry, or sick, or in need of help in some way.

Jonah’s story is probably one bible story that we remember; at least the getting swallowed and spit out by a fish part of the story. God sent Jonah on a mission. The prophet was to tell the people of Ninevah to repent from their ways or the city would be overthrown. Jonah flees from God when he hears that he is supposed to bring this message to Ninevah. Running from God, he jumps on a ship. God sends a big storm. Jonah spills his story to the other sailors. The sailors throw him overboard. When the fish spits him out, God is waiting for Jonah and sends him on his way to Nineveh. This time Jonah goes.

Then comes the interesting twist. The King of Ninevah actually heeds Jonah’s prophecy. In the hope that God will change his mind, the King declares a fast for the humans AND the animals in Ninevah. “Humans, animals, herd nor flock shall eat or drink, and cover themselves with sackcloth.” I have this visual of the cattle and sheep in sackcloth mourning alongside the humans – another delightful part of this story.

All that is behind us when today’s first reading begins. We begin with Jonah’s big “Its not fair” sulk scene. Jonah is deeply pained by God’s merciful change of mind. Nineveh was the capital of Israel's greatest enemy. Why is Ninevah off the hook? Jonah feels so aggrieved. Jonah is very dramatic. Let me die here in the desert, he says.

Drama and humor aside, there is a very serious question here that reaches into our own lives today. Today’s reading is the very end of the book of Jonah. It ends with God’s piercing question to Jonah: “Should I not be concerned about a city of 120,000 and many animals?”

This book of Jonah is a heartwarming story of human stubborn shortsightedness (Jonah), a people that decides to change their ways (Ninevah), and God’s loving mercy to the people and their animals. In the end, God’s mercy and loving goodness overwhelms the great city. Ninevah has a change of heart. They repent. They choose to mend their ways. God has a change of heart.

And Jonah? Not sure. Did he finally relent and accept God’s mercy for the newfound path of the Ninevites? The story ends with a question. We don’t know how Jonah answers it.

Because we hear so much from Jonah - the scrapes he gets into, his pouting, the guilt trip he tries to place on God - I find him endearing in a childlike way. Yet the bigger story is God goodness, God’s loving mercy that doesn’t discriminate between Israel and Ninevah; God, whose created world is larger than humans.

The bigger story is that piercing question God asks Jonah: Should I not be concerned about a city of 120,000 and many animals?” Is there any living creature or thing on this earth that falls outside of God’s mercy and goodness?

Should God care about Ninevah? Let’s frame the question in a 21st century context. Should God care about Democrats? Should God care about Republicans? Should God care about immigrants? Should God care about Americans? Should God care about all of God’s creation including animals and plants and all that has breath and life?

Of course, the answer is that God’s mercy and goodness has no boundaries. No matter how hard we may try to persuade God to close the doors of the Kingdom on our enemies, God’s plans for creation are bigger, kinder, wider.

I hold out great hope for Jonah. He found God’s healing mercy once in this story and prayed after his fish adventure: “I called to you, O God, out of my distress, and you answered me…The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me… yet you brought up my life from the depths O God.”

In mercy, God’s creative purposes are found. Even in Jonah’s and our confusion and wrestling with God’s great expansive, loving kindness, there is grace and hope that with God we can grow the Kingdom together with our friends and former enemies.

I hold out hope for Jonah that he answered yes to that question: Should God care about all of God’s creation including plants and animals and all that has breath and life?

How about you?