

# Pursuing Grace

January 21, 2018

The passage which Ed read from the Book of Jonah this week is probably less familiar to most of us than the preceding chapters. If it is at all possible, reading these final two chapters of Jonah make him even harder to stomach. The book starts out with God telling Jonah to preach to the Ninevites, to tell them to repent, and Jonah refusing. Have you ever stopped to ask why Jonah refused? I'll give you a hint – it's the same instinct that had Nathaniel ask in our Gospel last week, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Pure and simple, Jonah was racist. He didn't want redemption for the Ninevites, didn't want to acknowledge that God could work for Good in their lives, didn't want them to be redeemed and therefore on the same playing field as he was. Jonah is not a very likeable character.

Earlier in this book we also hear of Jonah being swallowed by a large fish for 3 days. There's some powerful womb and tomb imagery here, and any student of literature would expect that when Jonah is expectorated from the fish it will signal a new birth in his psyche. Jonah the bigoted egoist is swallowed by the fish, and we all expect this to be a conversion experience. Being entombed, or "en-wombed," as it were, is an archetypal image across cultures for a place where life-altering change takes place. Quite simply, we are VERY different when we go into the womb than when we come out of it. Every time I read this passage, I expect Jonah to be different when he is vomited onto shore. He never is.

Indeed, despite the divine hand at work in Jonah's deliverance, in the portion of the story we read this week, we find that there has been no conversion whatsoever. Jonah, the reluctant prophet who thought he could run away from God rather than preach a word of warning to non-Israelites, is still reluctant, still racist, and still following his own plan. Jonah exhibits the arrogance of the truly self-absorbed when he refuses to change, even when given new birth and a second chance.

While allusions to certain public figures and politicians would be easy here, let us remember Jesus' admonishment to look inward before we cast stones. In some ways, the book of Jonah acts as a cautionary tale – be careful that this doesn't happen to you. Be careful not to retrench when God tries to stretch us beyond our stereotypes and comfort zones. When the fish of life swallows you up and you are, somehow, given the grace to come out the other side, learn from it. Whether we are talking about divorce or diet or war, the lesson here is clear: don't be a Jonah. Don't go back to doing the same things you had before, simply turning your words around and expecting people (or God) not to notice that you haven't changed.

In this book full of satire, the message that Jonah proclaims is yet one more example of irony. A common English version of his message, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed," is much better translated as, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overturned." Indeed, it is! This unswerving, self-righteous prophet thinks that he is foretelling Nineveh's demise, when in actuality he is offering a prophetic foretelling of their conversion. The word play is brilliant. Jonah doesn't change, but the Ninevites do. Their lives are overturned.

Wicked, evil Nineveh, Nineveh, which the prophet Zephaniah had condemned because of its arrogance and Nahum had called "the city of bloodshed" heard God's message through Jonah,

and took it to heart. In yet another nod to the absurd, we hear that not only every man, woman, and child of Nineveh is to demonstrate their repentance, all of the cattle and sheep are to participate in the penance, too. The king wants to make sure that the depth and breadth of this conversion cannot be questioned. He declares a fast, implores everyone to put on the garb of the repentant, and declares that everyone “shall turn from their evil way and from the violence they have in hand.” This is not just an external show of piety. Unlike their prophet, they heard God’s word, and heeded it.

And Jonah’s response? It is something like, “See? This is why I didn’t want to prophecy to them, this is why I didn’t want to warn them of God’s judgment. I knew that they might respond, and you are a God of mercy, loathe to punish.” This whole story hinges on Jonah’s anger toward God’s mercy.

Now, before we scoff any more at Jonah, we need to look at some of the places where his character and ours may intersect – isn’t that when cautionary tales are the most powerful? What Jonah is doing here is trying to get God to abide by a dominant theology of the Hebrew Scriptures – retribution. That term, retribution, has gotten a bad rap over the years. Retribution is really just the rule of cause and effect – if I do something, something will happen. If I do not do something, something else will or will not happen. More often than not, we want this to be true. If you are kind, kindness will follow you. If you drive safely and well, you will arrive at your destination. Often, we understand this as justice – things working the way they should. Jonah thinks that the Ninevites should get what they have coming.

Think of Enron or the parking tickets on the cars of people who park illegally in handicapped spaces – often, we can join Jonah in championing the theology of retribution and justice.

But what about the times that we have blown up unnecessarily at the kids? What about the times that we have been caught in a lie? What about the times that we have frozen out a friend or spouse? What about the really big times, when we have done things that we are definitely not proud of?

Jonah’s Achilles’ heel is his rigid, egotistical, unswerving refusal to see that justice without mercy is lifeless. We need mercy.

Years ago, a friend told me that praying the Lord’s Prayer was a fearful experience for her. The idea of asking God to forgive us AS WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVING brought her tremendous anxiety. She admitted that she was not a very forgiving person, and therefore feared that she would not receive mercy herself. While that is one perspective on the prayer, I have always found that phrase to be incredibly liberating. What if, instead of seeing that verse as a foretelling of our doom, we take it as challenge to move toward wholeness and healing, move toward making sure that our sins and those of others do not continue to have power over us.

What if Jonah had had this in his heart? Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Forgive us our debts. Forgive us our trespasses, but only inasmuch as we have been forgiving. Help us to BE that which we are yearning to receive. THAT, my friends, is one of the most powerful, profound, and liberating concepts of the Christian faith.

Lest we wrongfully ascribe mercy only to the New testament, let us remember that for every story of retribution, there is another witnessing to Yahweh as the God of second, seventh, even forty-seventh chances. In fact, I have often called the Old Testament a library of stories of unrequited love – God continually offering God’s self to the people, and the people saying yes, we love you, too, until they see someone or something shiny and new and stray from their covenant with God. The people stray, and God devises another way to be in right relationship with them. Amazingly, breathtakingly, God remains faithful in this love affair. The Hebrew Scriptures are a mosaic of stories of God trying to help the people uphold their covenant.

And isn’t that what God does in our last chapter today? After Jonah has pouted like a petulant child that he knew that God would be merciful, and that is why he didn’t want to prophecy in the first place, even when he is angry that God relents in light of the Ninevites conversion, and says that he would rather die than see these people be forgiven, God gives HIM another chance. We get a glimpse of the true mystery of divine love when this fellow who spent much of this tale fleeing from proclaiming God’s mercy, who doesn’t comprehend that he himself was the recipient of mind boggling mercy, who throws a temper-tantrum when God offers mercy to the Ninevites, then continues to be the target of God’s faithful love.

In these final verses of Jonah, we finally find our redemption – not in Jonah, but in God. In a God who pursues us unceasingly, in a God who knows our faults and failings, in a God we may have disobeyed, in a God who each of us has run from in one way or another, in all of these places and more, the book of Jonah reminds us that God has not, does not, and will not give up on us. (I hear the U2 song “I will follow” cuing up here... Walk away, walk away, walk away, walk away, I will follow...) God is the redemptive one here – God has and will continue to seek and seek and seek.

As we put the book of Jonah back up on the shelf, let us pray for the grace to have learned from its lessons – may we have the breadth of spirit to imagine that God offers mercy to ALL, not just those who we can stomach, may we have the humility and sincerity to admit that we need God when we are in over our heads, and may we be bowled over by the promise that God will continue to pursue our love and wholeness.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

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