

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 24, 2021

Jonah 3:1-5 and 10

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Many of us are familiar with the story we often call “Jonah and the Whale.”

In this story, a prophet named Jonah receives direction from the Lord,

To go to a city called Nineveh and preach to the people there,

To call them to account for their sinful behavior.

But instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah runs away – he gets on a boat heading in the

opposite direction. It turns out escaping God’s call is not so easy,

and, as the story goes, Jonah ends up swallowed by a big fish.

Basically, he experiences a divine ***time out***,

and, amazingly enough, it works.

After three days, Jonah **repents and prays** and the fish vomits him onto dry land.

This time, Jonah does what God says.

He stomps his way across Nineveh

preaching the shortest sermon ever, and

what’s really shocking is that it’s one of the most effective sermons ever!

The people of Nineveh **repent** – they turn away from their sinful ways.

God has mercy on them and decides **not to destroy the city after all**.

All’s well that ends well, right?

Except, **that’s not the end of the story**.

Because even though we usually turn Jonah’s story into a cautionary tale

about trying to run away from God’s call,

what happens at the end suggests that this story
has another important lesson to teach us.

Listen to these verses from the last chapter in Jonah's story:

Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?' And he said, 'Yes, angry enough to die.' Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?'

In a psychological study a few years ago, pairs of college students were recruited
to play a game of Monopoly. But the game was rigged.

With the flip of a coin, one of the two players
in each game was assigned to be the rich player.

This player got more money up front than the other player
and received more money **every time he went around the board.**

Most of the pairs figured out what was happening,
and, as you would expect,

the rich player nearly always won the game.

What you might *not* have expected is how this experience
influenced the attitude and thoughts of the rich player in each pair.

As they played, the rich players quickly began to exhibit

increasingly **dominant and assertive behavior**,
striking their pieces loudly against the board as they moved,
displaying *power* over the poor player verbally and nonverbally –
even taking more from the bowl of common snacks.

The rich players also behaved
more rudely toward the poor player,
were less sensitive to the poor player's
experience and frustration,
and became more demonstrative of their own wealth and success
– virtual though it was!

When the game was over,
the scientists interviewed the players about their experiences
playing this rigged game –
and at this point, **everyone knew the game had been rigged** –
and yet when they asked the rich players why they won,
the players talked about **decisions they had made**,
properties they had bought,
ways they had *earned* their success,
completely discounting the fact that their success had been
predetermined by a roll of dice before the game ever started.¹

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_piff_does_money_make_you_mean/transcript?language=en

Jonah was a Hebrew, one of God's chosen people.

And if God chose Jonah to be a prophet, presumably it was because Jonah

had shown himself to be faithful,

earnest in his desire to follow God's ways.

But Jonah's faithfulness has its limits,

and Jonah discovers what those limits are when

God tells him to **go to the city of Nineveh**

and tell the people there of God's love and mercy.

Jonah doesn't want to go.

And it turns out there is a good reason Jonah doesn't want

To go and preach to the people of Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the ruthless Assyrian empire,

an empire that had terrorized the Israelites.

The people of Nineveh were the Israelites' sworn enemies,

so it's no wonder Jonah balked when God told him to go

and preach to them about God's love and mercy –

for, as Jonah knows, God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing...

and Jonah isn't so sure he wants to see Nineveh on the receiving

end of God's grace.

When I lived in Colorado, a friend convinced me to participate in a sprint triathlon.

For months we trained together for the race, and when the day came,

I felt prepared.

Swimming was my strongest event, and I got out of the water feeling good.

I hopped on my bike and headed out.

The bike ride wasn't very interesting –

seven and a half miles out the highway in one direction and then back –

but when I got onto the road, I couldn't believe how good I felt,

not just strong, but *fast*.

Clearly, all the training had paid off.

I was a little surprised because I really am not that athletic,

but I *owned* this race!

Before I knew it, it was time to turn around and come back.

Only then did I realize that what I thought was

hard work and natural ability

was in fact a very strong wind

that had been at my back

and was now fighting me mightily in the other direction.

What happens to Jonah at the end of his book,

when the plant giving him shade withers

and he feels the effects of the sun and hot wind,

is a **perfect example of someone fighting against the current**

of God's mercy and grace.

Jonah is convinced that the Ninevites should never be

on the receiving end of God's mercy,

and he is equally convinced that

he deserves whatever blessings God offers him.

He is caught in this cycle of judgment and condemnation,

struggling to extend to his enemies the same grace God has

offered to him.

It's a pattern of judgment we all get caught in:

we judge ourselves worthy or unworthy in spite of evidence to the contrary.

We judge others too, by their appearance, their achievements or lack thereof,

failing to see the many, many factors that contribute

to their success or failure.

We become trapped in a cycle of judgment,

unable to extend compassion, empathy, or love.

There is a story in the gospel of John. Jesus is teaching in the temple

When a group of religious leaders bring a disgraced woman before Jesus

to test his knowledge of the law and his willingness to enforce it.

These men are buoyed up by the currents of culture and privilege.

After all, if the woman was indeed caught in the act of adultery, as they claim,

then somewhere there was also a man caught in the act as well!

But Jesus refuses to get drawn into a discussion about law,

and he refuses to condemn the woman.

Here and throughout his ministry, Jesus keeps trying to teach us

the same thing God tried to teach Jonah: **God is not transactional.**

God is not obsessed with right and wrong,

guilt and punishment, success and rewards.

God is obsessed with loving us **just as we are**.

because *God is relentlessly relational*.

Time and again, particularly with those on the margins

who have spent their whole lives fighting invisible currents of prejudice,

Jesus **sets aside judgment**

and shows us *what it looks like to choose compassion*.

Father Gregory Boyle once said,

“The measure of our compassion...lies in our willingness to see ourselves

in kinship with each other, with the folks who are on the margins,

for there is an idea that has taken root in the world...

that there just might be lives out there that matter less than other lives.”

To move past this idea that some lives matter more than others, Boyle suggests *service*.

When we serve another, he says, we move toward experiencing the kind of compassion

that can stand in awe of what another person has to carry

rather than standing in judgment of how they carry it.²

Service frees us for compassion

because it puts us in relationship with those we are more likely to judge,

enabling us to, as the poet Wendell Berry puts it,

“imagine lives that aren’t [ours].”

² Father Gregory Boyle, “Faith and Compassion.” Faith and Life Lecture Series,
<http://fig.nowsprouting.com/stphilipthedeaconlutheranchurch/media.php?pageID=7>.

When Jonah finally goes to Nineveh after his time in the belly of the whale,
he simply walks a straight line through the city,
preaches his seven-word sermon, and leaves.
He does not stop to learn anything about who the Ninevites are,
He interacts not at all with the people who live there,
and as a result, he has no capacity to imagine their lives
or empathize with their challenges.

That is *not* service.

That is *not* relationship.

And so Jonah remains **trapped in ignorance and judgment.**

At the 2016 Oscars, Lady Gaga performed the song “‘Til It Happens to You”
from a documentary about sexual assault on college campuses.

The lyrics are “‘til it happens to you, you don’t know how I feel.

‘Til it happens to you, you won’t know, it won’t be real.”³

On the one hand, the song is exactly right – how can we ever truly know the nature
of another person’s experience, especially if it is a horrific, traumatic experience
we haven’t had?

On the other hand, in order to faithfully follow a relentlessly relational God,
we are going to have to find ways to feel and show compassion
for people’s whose experience is *not* our own,
for people we will never fully understand.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rufPMisw4o>

Compassion comes when we **set aside judgment**

and focus on *what we have in common*:

our God-given identity as beloved children,

who have discovered in the life, death, and resurrection

of Jesus that we are beloved not because of

who we are or what we have done,

but simply because **we belong to God and God chooses love.**

God chooses to love, even Jonah, in his petulant anger,

even the religious authorities with their unjust accusations,

even the Ninevites who persistently violated God's ways.

God chooses to love even us, even when our ignorance and our rush to judgment

prevents us from showing love and compassion to those who need it most.

And it is God's love, love most fully revealed in the incarnation,

when God decided to put God's own self in our human experience,

it is in that love that the soul finds its worth.

It is not our actions or our piety that confers worth or value, it is the fact

that God created us, God calls us God's own, God loves us no matter what,

enough to be with us as one of us,

without judgment or condition.

In a letter to Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton wrote,

“Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody’s business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can.”

God is calling us to Nineveh, to that place and that people we cannot imagine
are worthy of God’s love or our time.

God calls us to love others with the kind of love that does not
stop to ask whether they are deserving of it.

We can run from that call or outright refuse it,
but imagine what might happen if we dared to accept it.

Amen.

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