

Note: This was the adaptive reading from Jonah read at the onset of the sermon.

God saw what they had done, that they had turned away from their evil lives. He *did* change his mind about them. What he said he would do to them he didn't do.

"I Knew This Was Going to Happen!"

Jonah was furious. He lost his temper. He yelled at God, "God! I knew it—when I was back home, I knew this was going to happen! That's why I ran off to Tarshish! I knew you were sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, and ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness!

"So, God, if you won't kill them, kill *me*! I'm better off dead!"

God said, "What do you have to be angry about?"

But Jonah just left. He went out of the city to the east and sat down in a sulk. He put together a makeshift shelter of leafy branches and sat there in the shade to see what would happen to the city.

God arranged for a broad-leafed tree to spring up. It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk. Jonah was pleased and enjoyed the shade. Life was looking up.

But then God sent a worm. By dawn of the next day, the worm had bored into the shade tree and it withered away. The sun came up and God sent a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah's head and he started to faint. He prayed to die: "I'm better off dead!"

Then God said to Jonah, "What right do you have to get angry about this shade tree?"

Jonah said, "Plenty of right. It's made me angry enough to die!"

God said, "What's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than 120,000 childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"

What a great story! Jonah...what a great character! Earlier, in the book of Jonah, Jonah, who skirts his responsibility as a prophet, hops on board a boat headed in the opposite direction God wants him to go, is swallowed by a BIG fish, and is regurgitated...three days later - after he had come to his senses. Jonah then travels to Nineveh - the place where God wanted him to go in the first place - and delivers the shortest sermon ever, "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overturned." Note what's missing in Jonah's sermon... there is no mention of the possibility of mercy, but none-the-less, Nineveh's repentance is immediate and *all* the Ninevites - all 120,000 people in a three mile radius *and* the animals... clothe themselves from head to toe in sackcloth and ashes!

And now today, the writer of this marvelous short story picks up the narrative in verse ten - where *God changes his mind* about destroying Nineveh because you see, in fact the people have repented; they changed their ways ...and oh, how that irks Jonah. As he sits under the shade of a bush, (which God provided for him), Jonah is steeped in anger, filled with resentment and woefully wants to die because God extended mercy to a rugged group of people.

And in all honesty, I can't blame Jonah for his disdain for the Ninevites. After all, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire and responsible for wreaking havoc and destroying the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The kings boasted of their violent conquests and horrific images that emerged from these conquests. As I read through some of the gruesome details this week, I wondered if this story didn't have a familiar ring to it? The war in Ukraine has been going on since February 2022. Putin has been at the helm where thousands have been killed, millions of people have had to flee their homes and entire cities have been reduced to rubble.

So what does this story of exaggeration and humor say about the reluctant, bitter, prophet who *resents*, *resents* God's most fundamental attributes - that of sheer grace and mercy...especially when it comes to his enemies? And what...what... does this over dramatized Hebrew short story have to say to us today? You see, Jonah wants

a God who's fair...and so do I. Afterall, who wants a God who rewards an eleventh hour show of repentance. I mean, come on God, really? How can you show this grace and mercy stuff to someone who doesn't deserve it?

Welcome to the world of Jonah...and maybe ours, too.

Pastor Bill once shared a reflection paper with me he wrote a "few" years ago. It included an excerpt from a book entitled, *Irony in the Old Testament*. The discussion was about the "absurdity of God." The wildly unreasonable, irrational, bizarre behavior of God. A God who graciously, compassionately and relentlessly shows mercy for a city smack dab in the Assyrian empire. Mercy for a city with a bad reputation. Mercy for a broken city; for broken people. People who don't even know their right hand from their left. And Jonah, Jonah... would rather die, than see the Ninevites receive God's divine clemency.

O, Lord, take my life from me because it is better for me to die, than to sit back and watch this whole mercy, grace and love thing bestowed upon the Ninevites!

Paul Tillich says "there is something even in the misfortune of our best friends which does not displease us." Let me repeat that.... Ouch. Now I don't know about you, but I have experienced that sick feeling in the pit of my stomach when I realize, maybe even subconsciously, that I have resented God's overarching love for those who don't fit *my* image of who should receive that love... or jealousy, when they do. But the thing is...when we, ourselves, are steeped in anger and resentment (and in Jonah's case it was directed toward God), we're miserable people. We're not very nice.

Several years ago a friend of mine gave me this little checklist for evaluating your maturity. (*kiddingly, I'm sure I didn't need but...*) And if you know me, I got right on it - checking off the things I was really good at already. :) But when I got to number eleven...I circled it and highlighted it! *Rejoices in the good fortune and success of others having outgrown petty jealousy and envy*. I would like to think I got this one covered for good but I know that I, and perhaps you too, are in need of and have received grace - when you have exhausted all the avenues of keeping score. Who gets more, who deserves more, and who doesn't.

You see, God's generous grace frees us to learn - it freed the Ninevites - those that couldn't tell their left hand from their right. In other words, the people who didn't

know what grace looked like; people with childlike ignorance of divine mercy. Jonah wants a God who is fair, and so do the laborers in our gospel reading today. Especially those who worked from sun up to sun down picking grapes and received the same amount as those who clocked in at 5 o'clock and clocked out an hour later!

Where's the justice in that? The land owner hires workers at multiple intervals during the day and pays everyone the same wages. I don't know about you, but someone in Bible study on Thursday said if this is the case, he would show up at 5 pm the next day! Envy, jealousy, and self-absorption sure do skew God's vision of generosity. Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that most of us identify with the 12 hour group when reading this parable - we want our fair share. But no matter where we are in the payment line, this parable asks us to consider how we might respond to God's grace in our own lives. You know, the landowner in the story had a different conception of fairness and so does God.

So what helps me, and perhaps you, live into the genuine generosity and lavish love for others? What frees us from our limited understanding of a universal grace, a grace which sees all of creation as a part of this amazing grace? Perhaps...just perhaps... it *is* the "absurdity of God."

...and when God saw what they had done, how the Ninevites changed their ways...He DID change his mind about them. And I wonder, I just wonder... if God, who IS sheer grace and mercy and abounding in steadfast love changes his mind about me, you, about us, too? **Amen.**