

Called to Be Like God
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Have you ever had one of those conversations where someone shares their frustration at another person with you but you find it is difficult to get caught up in their emotions because you can see the other person's side, or maybe you feel differently about the situation?

Perhaps it is a co-worker who feels certain they have been undermined but you happen to know details that otherwise explain the situation.

Perhaps it is a family member at a holiday meal who speaks about an entire group of people with disdain while you, knowing better, struggle to decide whether to confront them or just walk away.

There are many situations where this occurs and they all boil down to one truth: it is easier to accept or to forgive someone else's enemies than it is our own.

So, often when we hear the story from the book of Jonah we find ourselves skirting quickly past it, happily willing to embrace God's forgiveness of the people of Nineveh. After all, we don't know these people. Let's be honest...most of us don't even know where Nineveh was!

So, especially when we only read these few verses that Gabe shared with us today, what we do is celebrate what Jonah says to God in chapter 4, "for 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 4:2b, NRSV).

The disconnect, of course, is that while we tend to say that as an affirmation of who God is - because remember, we're fine seeing God forgive the Ninevites...Jonah says it as an accusation (Kathryn M. Schifferdecker at [Commentary on Jonah 3:1-5, 10 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)) because, frankly, he isn't ready to witness or participate in a second chance given to people he would rather hate.

And we are reminded again that it is dangerous to only read a few verses of scripture outside of their context. Because if all we ever read is chapter 3, then the book of Jonah is a nice story of repentance and forgiveness. But, when we read the entire book - and that's something I would encourage you to do...after all it's only four chapters - what we find is a story that speaks honestly about how difficult it can be for us to want someone else to have another chance. It is a story that confronts us when we struggle to see the humanity in others.

This book, so much different than other books in this group we call prophets, does not set itself firmly in a historical time and place. It is a story about one who we call a prophet because of the work to which he is called, but here we do not see him acting in the same manner as other prophets. In fact, this book is different because while scholars struggle to name the genre of this piece of literature, there is wide agreement that it isn't the story of a historical figure, but rather a story told to teach us about God and humanity, and to leave us thinking.

So, let's remember this story. It opens with God speaking to Jonah, calling him to go and speak a word of indictment against the wicked people of Nineveh. But right from the beginning Jonah

is resistant. In fact, we hear no response from him other than being told that “Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1:3a, NRSV).

Immediately Jonah ran the other way.

And I suspect this isn't because he was scared to criticize the Ninevites. Rather, perhaps it is his confession later, in chapter 4, when he names the forgiving and merciful nature of God, that caused him to run from this task. Because Jonah had already decided what *he* thought about these people, these Ninevites. Meanwhile, he knew - even without God saying so - that God would give them another chance.

And so he ran. He ran and got on a boat, and in doing so endangered the lives of others. He ran and caused so much trouble that the sailors had no choice but to throw him overboard. He ran, but no matter how far he went, he could not leave God's presence.

The story tells us, in its wonderful folklorish way, that God would not leave Jonah alone, but sent a large fish to swallow him, to house him in a protected place. Yes, the belly of a fish, full of stomach acid and half digested breakfast, was, we are told, a place of safety for our beloved Jonah.

But, lest he get too comfortable there, the story goes on and tells us that under instruction from God, the fish vomited Jonah onto the beach, perhaps now even closer to Nineveh than he had begun. And “still covered in sea water and vomit” (Schifferdecker) Jonah was again instructed to go and to proclaim the demise of the people of Nineveh.

And he went. But let's be honest...he did not do so with joy. He did not do so committed to the action. We can almost picture him, steam coming from his ears as he had to go and speak to people he would have happily watched die.

And we know, because Gabe read this part of the book to us, that the story says that the people of Nineveh - from the greatest to the least, even the king and the animals, repented of their sins and God did not destroy them.

But the story doesn't end there. Rather, we return to Jonah and to his accusation thrown at God, his anger at the reality that ours is a forgiving God whose interest is in all people.

And the story ends with Jonah, still fuming at the reality of the wideness of God's mercy.

The story ends with God offering Jonah a little room to sit with his feelings, to be honest about his anger, but then with God asking Jonah to be better. Having grown a plant to shade Jonah in his anger, we are told God finally takes away the plant and calls Jonah to account, reminding him *and us* that all people are God's people.

Friends, we read stories like this and it is easy for us to leave them as just a story. It is easy for us to relate to Jonah, to criticize Jonah, to feel for Jonah, to mock Jonah. It is easy for us to get caught up in the fantastical details like a fish in whose belly a human being can reside. It is even easy for us to celebrate who God is because we are fine with God forgiving the enemies of Jonah, or caring for people who lived thousands of years ago, or including people who we like to include anyway.

But, what happens when the Ninevites aren't Ninevites at all, but are the people we hate?

What happens when it is *we* who are called to proclaim the merciful nature of God to people that we wouldn't mind seeing thrown on a trash heap?

What happens when we confront the reality that God's interest is in all people, not just the ones we approve of?

When we read the story of Jonah it is easy to distract ourselves with conversations about the big fish or with expeditions to try to find proof of it. It is easy to distract ourselves by trying to locate the time and place and people in a story that most scholars don't believe was ever meant to be read as history. But, friends, those conversations are really just distractions.

They are distractions from a truth that we *want* to believe, but that - if we are honest - challenges us.

It is a truth that says that ours is a God of all humanity.

It is a truth that reminds of us that widely used quote that reads, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

It is a truth that calls us back to the inauguration benediction on Wednesday when Rev. Silvester Beaman prayed, "In you, O God, we discover our humanity and in our humanity we discover our commonness."

Friends, we have gotten good at picking our teams and battling to the death. We have gotten good at silencing voices we would rather not hear. We have gotten good at vilifying those who look different or believe differently than we do.

But, we are not called to admire or even just to worship God, but in doing so to be changed, to follow in God's way, to love and forgive as God does. And in making these commitments we are called to become more like God each day.

This is not work that is easy, especially in these times. This is not for the faint of heart, friends - this is hard work. But this is the work to which we, as people of faith, are called. May we listen...may we respond...may it be said of us that like our God we are "gracious...and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

Perhaps no one has said it better than Amanda Gorman on Wednesday in her poem "The Hill We Climb" where she wrote, "And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but what stands before us. We close the divide because we know to put our future first, we must first put our differences aside. We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another. We seek harm to none and harmony for all."

This is the work to which our faith calls us. May it be our work. Amen.