

“Going Deep: Even Them?”

Jonah 3:1-4:3

August 23, 2020

What is the purpose of grace? It’s a question that has been swirling in my mind as I’ve been reading and rereading the Book of Jonah. What is the tangible, practical impact of grace? Can you see grace? Because the more I read Jonah’s story, the more I am convinced that its theme is the confounding, unnerving, and even infuriating grace of God. For a preacher, one who has staked my life’s work on the gift and goodness of God’s grace, this story raises some troubling realities about the vast chasm separating what we might *want* grace to mean and what scripture teaches us about it. What if grace is both gift *and* charge, something we receive and are commanded to offer?

The third chapter of the Book of Jonah begins with familiar words for those of us who’ve been following this story of call and resistance. The word of the Lord came to Jonah. We’ve seen this play before. But this time, perhaps still drying out from his deep-sea adventure, Jonah goes to Nineveh. Well, his body goes. His heart isn’t in it. We know because he preaches a terrible sermon. All judgment and no forgiveness. Just eight words of threat and damnation.

And with that weak half-hearted attempt, Jonah closes his folder, gathers up his notes, and takes his seat. Verse five seems almost comically out of place. The people of Nineveh believed God (not Jonah), proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth. And then, the story piles on. The king repented. The city leadership repented. The animals repented. Can you imagine covering a pig with sackcloth? The narrative wants this point made abundantly clear—Nineveh got the message. They turned from evil. They prayed for forgiveness. And God forgave. The city is spared. Grace abounds. Jonah’s eight-word sermon has more impact than a Billy Graham crusade. It’s a stunning, almost unbelievable success in any estimation. Well, except one.

Remember, the word of the Lord came to Jonah. It is a word that claims us, calls us, changes us. And Jonah needs to speak those words as much as the Ninevites need to hear them. Well, Jonah does not have any problem believing the success of his prophetic proclamation to the people of Nineveh. It is precisely what he feared would happen.

And Jonah throws a temper tantrum that would make any three-year-old unjustly denied a popsicle proud. He unleashes on God, berating the creator of the universe for being so filled with steadfast love, so quick to forgive. He ends with a dramatic flair—I’d rather die than see these evil people forgiven. Take me now. I imagine kicking and screaming.

What happened here? What are we to make of Jonah’s outrage? Surely grace is a good thing, a gift to be celebrated and welcomed...right?

Well, that depends. Here’s what I think is happening in this morning’s scripture. Jonah was surely well-acquainted with this God of grace and mercy. But he understood this God as *his* God. Jonah wanted some parameters around grace; he wanted clarity about the boundary lines of mercy. After all, if Nineveh can be spared, is there any limit to God’s grace?

I wanted you to hear the story from Acts 10 this morning as further evidence that this is a timeless conundrum. Just before the passage we’ve heard, the Apostle Peter has a vision from God and an encounter with a Roman officer that totally transforms his perception of God’s grace. Here’s how it happens: a messenger of God visits a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion and, most shockingly of all, a Gentile. At the same time, Peter is given a vision that disrupts his carefully constructed categories of clean and unclean. The two men meet, and Peter offers this testimony:

“You yourself know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but, God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

The sermon that he preaches represents his stunned reaction to this experience. It may seem natural now to repeat those words that begin Peter’s sermon: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” But please do not miss the radical change those words represent. Peter has spent his entire life believing that God *does* show partiality. Partiality to the chosen people of Israel, partiality to the inner circle of disciples, partiality to those born under the promises of God, given the law and the covenant. Peter’s most deeply held conviction was of a God who was absolutely devoted to one group of people. And now, this devout and faithful man has been utterly changed. His sermon represents this change; it is a radical message of God’s limitless mercy.

As Peter speaks, the Spirit of God comes to *all* who hear—Jew and Gentile, man and woman, insider and outsider, believer and skeptic, clean and unclean, sophisticated and simple, all of *them*. Those who had come from Jerusalem are blown away. Luke puts it this way: “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the Gentiles*.” Even them? Yes, even them.

All of the preventative barriers and exclusive restrictions are no match for God’s radical acceptance. Who are we to say no when it is so clear that God has already said yes? Can we withhold the baptismal waters for those whom God’s Spirit has claimed? So they are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and the church is set on a new course of inclusion.

Not everyone was happy about this redirection. Why not? Isn’t the grace of God a good thing?

Well, that depends. It depends, I think, on our understanding of the purpose of grace, its impact and influence. If grace is primarily about determining divine winners and losers, a gift offered to the chosen few, then there can be too much of this good thing.

But what if grace is both gift *and* charge, something we receive and are commanded to offer?

If this is true, then the impact of God’s grace must be to make us more gracious toward others. Even them. If it does not, we have tragically missed the point. The calling word of God to Jonah was not just about mercy for the Ninevites. It was about transformation for Jonah—the intent was to make Jonah more gracious.

This week’s text may not end well for Jonah—having a pity party and railing against God for being God—but it does leave open a question with which we are meant to wrestle. Have we allowed the grace of God to make us more gracious, the love of God to make us more loving...even toward *them*?

The unfortunate story of human history includes an unending series of attempts to draw definitive dividing lines determining who is deserving of grace, worthy of love. On this, the track record of communities of faith is especially disheartening. As Marilynne Robinson writes in her essay “Freedom of Thought,” “We do not deal with one another as soul to soul, and the churches are as answerable for this as anyone.”

How might we do better? What could transform us into vessels overflowing with the grace we have received rather than stingy dispensers of it? I find an answer when I compare our texts this morning. Jonah and Peter are both confronted with the radical grace of God toward those they’ve always assumed were beyond its reach. Jonah resists. Peter embraces. The difference is an encounter. The key is proximity.

Bryan Stevenson leads the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. In his book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson describes growing up poor in a racially segregated community in Delaware. He remembers his grandmother telling him, “*You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.*”ⁱ

You have to get close. The impact of encounter. The power of proximity. It changes us. Once you

discover the humanity of another person there's no going back to writing them off. If we are to deal with one another soul to soul, we must commit ourselves to encounters with others' souls.

Jonah refuses to get close enough to see the Ninevites. Instead, he casts verbal spears from a safe distance. Peter, on the other hand, is given a vision that draws him close to Cornelius. The power of proximity. When we keep our distance, it is easy to assume the worst of others and cling to the best version of ourselves. When we come close, we find our judgments and stereotypes break down under the microscope of encounter. And in that way, we see the purpose of grace—to make us more gracious.

We worship a God who chose to come close. Not just to some of us but to all of us. Not just to the deserving but to all of us. Not just to the well-connected but to all of us. Not just to the righteous but to all of us. Not just to those in the center but to all who live on the margins. God chose to come close to them, to us, to all. When we worship *this* God, we are also called to make the power of proximity a priority in our discipleship.

When I think of the widespread and deeply-entrenched meanness of our time, the alarming dearth of moral courage and faithful leadership, the disregard for the stranger and the ease with which we dismiss responsibility for each other, I am more convinced than ever that the voice of the faith community must fill the void. We must make visible the grace of God in a world where it is often unseen. We who have experienced God's mercy and love are called to be merciful and loving *not* because we are such good people but because God asks it of us. We have been claimed and compelled by this calling word of God. Not an informing word but a transforming word.

God's grace is not dependent on the accumulated and earned record of the recipient. This made Jonah absolutely furious. I think most of us can understand

his reaction. And yet, here is something that perhaps slipped Jonah's mind. He too was the recipient of this unmerited grace. He too had been given another chance. Jonah is called to extend to others the grace he himself has been granted. To do so, he must draw closer. Even to the Ninevites? Even them. He just can't bring himself to do it. In fact, he'd rather die.

But what about us? Can we find the courage to put the grace we've received into action? Can we lead a movement that ends the othering of people somehow unlike us, that puts a stop to the constant judgment and verbal stone-throwing? Can we be gracious, not because someone else deserves it but because God requires it?

What about us, the community of disciples called Second Presbyterian Church? Can we erase dividing lines and instead encounter our literal neighbors who have been as strangers to us? Can we allow these encounters to teach us something about the grace of God...and something about those whom we encounter? Can we listen to the stories of those from whom we feel most distant and seek the gift of understanding? Can we climb down off our platforms of self-righteousness and separateness to stand with those who suffer?

I don't want to sound overly dramatic here, but I truly believe that so much depends on how we answer these questions in the weeks and months ahead of us. The meanness of our time is enabled by our stubborn resistance to encounter one another, soul to soul. We don't have to live that way. We who worship the God made known in Jesus Christ *must* not live that way. We can give witness to a better path forward by making visible the gift of grace.

Can the grace of God make us more gracious? Yes, but only if we choose to let it work through us. Beloved, we've got work to do together.

ⁱ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, 2014.