

Only today and next Sunday remain in our four-week sermon series entitled, "Learning to Love Our Enemies." This series has been a bit challenging as learning to love our enemies is not easy and is something with which all of us continue to wrestle. And today is where the series gets wonderfully uncomfortable. Quick review: Matthew says seek restoration. Joseph actually practices it. And today... Jonah says: Wait. You mean God wants to restore them too? I'm getting ahead of myself. I chose the song, "I'll Take You There," because it makes me think of the story of Jonah. "The good thing for Jonah and for us, although God does not manifest God's presence everywhere, God is everywhere. Thus, as was the case with Jonah, we can walk out of God's presence, but never out of God's sight" (Christopher Davis, workingpreacher.org). Today's scripture reading comes from the book of Jonah, one of the most popular stories in the Old Testament- thanks to Veggie Tales ('02) and felt story boards. Did you know that Jonah is the only one of the twelve Minor Prophets mentioned by name in the Qur'an (10:98)? Those of you who grew up in church may recall hearing a version of the story of Jonah in Sunday School- mainly the story of Jonah and the big fish, though many of us learned it was a whale, but I quickly digress. Here's the cliff notes version. God calls Jonah, a prophet from Israel, to go and tell the sinful people of Nineveh to repent of their evil ways so that they will be saved from God's wrath. One small problem. Jonah despises the Ninevites, as Nineveh was a great enemy of Israel as the capital of the ancient Assyrian Empire. Jonah preferred to see them destroyed by God so instead of going to Nineveh, as God called him to do, Jonah fled in the opposite direction and boarded a ship that is until he was thrown

overboard and swallowed by a fish. He stayed in the fish's belly for three days and three nights. Jonah prayed reminding God that deliverance belongs to the Lord. Then God spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah up onto dry land. Talk about a salvation story? Jonah's issue is clear: he did not want to go to Nineveh. Jonah relented/obeyed the second time and walked for three days (3:3b) across the large city of Nineveh preaching his **eight word sermon**: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). Notice that nothing was mentioned about the possibility of mercy. And the Ninevites believed God. Nineveh's King issued a decree that all people and animals should fast and cover themselves in sackcloths and sit in ashes, acts of repentance. Everyone in Nineveh- even the animals- repented. Can you imagine the cows and sheep and donkeys in sackcloths and ashes? God is a God of relationship. "Perhaps this explains why the enemy uses relationships- our connection with people- as one of his strongest weapons in his effort to destroy our witness and steal our joy. Such was the case with Jonah" (Davis). Jonah, the reluctant prophet, was most successful in his mission yet Jonah ironically appears to have had all the air taken out of his balloon. Today's text is what is commonly considered Jonah's second rebellion: Jonah's anger toward God. First, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Reading this story is pretty funny, that is, unless you are Jonah. Even though the opening line of the book of Jonah does echo that of a prophet, "Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah..." (1:1), Jonah doesn't act much like a prophet. Unlike the other prophets, who protested when called by God, Jonah offered no excuses. He had absolutely no interest in

being in relations with the Ninevites, as their well-being was the least of his concern. What prophet wouldn't hope, pray or dream of the kind of response the Ninevites gave? Yet, it rarely, if ever, happened that way. But it did with Jonah on his first try- "the single most success story of the Bible- 120,000 people and countless animals change their ways in one day" with an eight-word sermon (workingpreacher.org, Karla Suomala). One might expect that Jonah's response to Nineveh's reaction might be as joyous as God's but instead of celebrating...Jonah had more than one bee in his bonnet- he had an entire hive. He was angry and unwilling for God to forgive others, for it offended his sense of justice. He is convinced that his way is better than God's way. He has yet to learn that "God is not a respecter of persons nor places" (Davis). Humans' perception of justice isn't always God's perception of mercy and justice. Thanks be to God! But before we go and beat up on Jonah, let us take a deep look within ourselves and our own sense of justice. We are not exempt from such feelings. Jonah was a part of the nation of Israel and when you belong to a nation, "the nation's enemies become ours as well, and to seek their good is viewed as being a traitor. The first casualty of war is the truth about the enemy. Dehumanizing those we oppose is the first step in propaganda. They are now seen as evil incarnate, and any sympathy for them is unpatriotic" (*Preaching God's Transformative Justice*, Catherine & Justo Gonzalez). Jonah was caught because on one hand he was successful in his mission but as a loyal Israelite, he had failed his people miserably. "What happens when we look at our neighbor today with such disdain, with such fury and fear? Little by little, caricature by caricature, we whittle away their humanity,

their worth until all that is left is an idea of our own creation” (day1.org, Eric D. Barreto). So, what is your Nineveh? Who are your Ninevites?

The Ninevites’ choice to repent causes God to change God’s mind. Yes, you read and heard that correctly. Even and especially God can change God’s mind and aren’t we glad or are we mad? The prophet Jeremiah mentions the possibility that if God plans evil against a nation, but that nation repents, then God would change his mind, and not bring disaster against that nation (18:7-8). One would think that if God can change God’s mind then humans can too?! But just because someone is obedient doesn’t mean that they’re genuinely repentant. “Jonah may be willing to do whatever is required to avoid another of his unique sea voyages, but that does not mean that he has accepted God’s concern for the inhabitants of Nineveh. Is God looking merely for obedience, or does God desire actions that arise from hearts conformed to God’s own heart (*Feasting on the Word*, Timothy B. Cargal)? Jonah didn’t like that God changed God’s mind, and he became hot. He didn’t want the Ninevites to be spared. He wanted them to suffer...to be punished for their sins...to get what they deserved and be destroyed. But that didn’t happen this time and Jonah believed God was unfair. Therefore, he prayed and confessed that the reason he originally fled WAS God, not Nineveh. He fled because he knew that in the end, God would show the Ninevites mercy they didn’t deserve. While praying Jonah quotes from Israel’s most hallowed of texts, the establishment of the covenant between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 34:6-7). He says, “I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and

ready to relent from punishing” (4:2). This reveals that Jonah was well acquainted with the heart and nature of God. Even with this knowledge, he still turns a blind eye to the fact that God’s steadfast love extends beyond any covenant. “Jonah expected mercy toward Israel, which also had proven idolatrous and periodically cruel. Yet he could not tolerate God’s mercy offered to the other side, the enemy” (*The Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible (TRSFBI)*). Jonah continues in his prayers asking God to please take his life from him, and God asks him, “Is it right for you to be angry” (v. 4)? Even though Jonah knew the characteristics of God in his head, he refused to absorb them in his heart. After God asked this question, Jonah said nothing as he left the city, until he found a place east of town to sit down and watch. He made a booth- a little, flimsy lean to- likely made out of sticks and branches- that provided temporary shade, and he waited to see what would happen to his enemies (v. 5). In some ways, it’s easy for us to see Jonah’s pity party and sulking. Yet, I will say that I resonate with Jonah’s anger at the wideness of God’s mercy. I don’t think Jonah’s anger is a bad thing, as it tells him something. However, I do think we all can become blinded by our anger and thus miss what God is leading us to be and do.

In the final chapter God provided Jonah with a shrub or a gourd plant, just as God had provided the big fish at just the right time. What’s interesting is that most of the art involving Jonah includes the fish but not many works of art feature Jonah and the shrub. “The living parable of the plant is used to teach Jonah not only about God’s concern for Nineveh, but also about Jonah” (workingpreacher.org, Anatheia Portier-

Young). Except we don't know if Jonah learned anything or not from God's living parable because we aren't told. "What the text reveals is that those unwilling to extend the benefits of relationship seldom get to continue to enjoy the benefits that come through relationship. It would not be long before the gourd would wither away, precisely at the time when he needed it most. Ironically, this was a time in the life of the Ninevites when they needed God the most. Yet, there is no indication that Jonah drew parallels between his own needs and those of the Ninevites. Instead, he again requested his own death" (Davis).

Bottom line: if God will not change to suit Jonah, Jonah would rather die. This is Jonah and this is Jonah's world- where he calls the shots. It sounds like Nineveh isn't the only one in need of repentance. Sometimes the desire to punish one's enemies can drive someone into a self-destructive fury" (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, Anthony J. Tang). For Jonah his fury blinds him from seeing Nineveh as God does, and from seeing how God gave him a second and a third chance. It's as if Jonah has forgotten that God and God alone decides to whom God will give mercy. However, as humans, God has given us free will to choose how we will respond. And if you think about it, **love is an act of the will, just as anger is**. Both responses are essentially something we choose.

God makes it clear in his final response to Jonah that "Jonah is full of self-interest rather than the devotion to the justice he claims. Unlike Jonah, God cares for all peoples and animals" (*TRSF*). God's final question to Jonah leaves many of us unsettled, as it probably should. It

“lingers in the air” (Amy Plantinga Pauw) and causes me to wonder how much more valuable is humanity, with our faults, failures, and flaws, than a shrub? It seems that Jonah never discerned the wickedness of his heart. The Ninevites did. “Jonah never questioned how he could find compassion for a plant, but not people. However, with gentleness and patience, God demonstrates, through this exchange with Jonah, God’s continued focus on relationship. Every station and every standard called for the elimination of Nineveh that is, all but one. The law called for it; prudence called for it; morality called for it; political economy called for it; survival of the fittest called for it. But God saw something different, something more, something far more precious- the God of relationship” (Davis). Do we believe in grace when grace is given to someone we think does not deserve it? Are we envious because God is generous? “In the end, God calls us to a grace we can barely grant to our enemies. But that is the very essence of God’s grace. It saves us and scares us in equal measure. Because if God’s love is so expansive, then whom do we have left to despise, whom do we have left to deem less than human, less than beloved by God” (Barreto)? Often “the human heart can cling to bitterness like a dog to a fleshy bone. It takes root so deeply within us that we would much rather die than forgive, much rather cling to pride than embrace mercy” (workingpreacher.org, Michael Chan). The scandal of grace is not that God forgives us. It is that God refuses to stop being gracious when grace reaches people we would rather condemn. How will we respond to God’s final question to Jonah- to us- in regards to our Nineveh? The choice is ours. The widening of God’s mercy is maddening because there is enough for all who repent. Thanks be to God. Amen.