

Lectionary 25 A
Grumbling at God's Grace

September 24, 2023
Jonah 3:10-4:11; Matthew 20:1-16

I thought about calling this the untold story of Jonah. I watched a few videos on Jonah on YouTube. I looked at Jonah in the *Spark Story Bible*, that is used with young children. They all stop with Nineveh repenting. They don't include chapter 4. They don't talk about Jonah grumbling at God. Jonah is angry because God is too gracious. Jonah is pouting because God did not destroy all the people of Nineveh. A quote from Anne Lamott describes Jonah well: "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." Jonah, like most Israelites, hated the Ninevites. He wants God to hate them, too. He's trying to create God in his own image.

In case you've forgotten ancient Jewish history, Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Assyria is the nation that completely wiped out the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They no longer exist. Assyria almost did the same thing to the two tribes of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, but the Israelites there barely survived. Those who survived these attacks were a bit angry with the Assyrians. Nineveh represented those scumbags.

It's like viewing anyone who is part of Al-Qaeda as an enemy because of what they did to America in 9/11/2001.

God called Jonah to go to Nineveh which was east. Jonah gets on a boat going west. You probably know that part of the story. There is a violent storm at sea. Jonah convinces the sailors that if they throw him overboard, the storm will stop. (He may have wanted to die at sea rather than go to Nineveh.) They throw him overboard. The storm stops. Jonah is saved from drowning by a big fish (not a whale). Technically, whales are not fish. The fish vomits Jonah back on land. God again tells him to go to Nineveh. This time he goes east.

He gives only a half-hearted effort. We are told that it takes three days to walk across the city. Jonah walks for one day. He doesn't even reach the center of town. He speaks five words in Hebrew: roughly: "In forty days, Nineveh destroyed." That's it!

The prophet, Nahum, also preached against Nineveh. He used over a thousand words.

As a prophet, Jonah is one of the worst. He preaches no grace. He doesn't call the people to repent. However, in spite of his weak efforts, he is successful. All the people figure out that they should repent. They are sorry for the evil they have done. They stop doing their evil and violence. God changes his mind and does not destroy them.

Jonah is angry because he was successful. He grumbles at God because God is too gracious to these evil people. Jonah wants them destroyed.

Could you imagine being called to go into the heart of Al-Qaeda and talk to them about Jesus? We would be reluctant to answer God's call to go and offer them salvation. We would be utterly astonished if they believed us, repented of their evil ways, and turned to worship Christ.

After that, we might find it hard to accept them as equals in the faith. We might remain skeptical if they had really changed. We worry that their presence in the church is really to worship God; or to find locations for bombs to destroy the building. We, like Jonah, probably don't really want God to be gracious to such evil people. We'd like to create God in our image.

Our lives would be much easier if God would just destroyed them. Converting them makes life hard for us. We may not be able to forgive them as quickly as God does. We hold on to resentments. We might never be able to fully trust these former enemies.

There is grumbling in our Gospel reading. Those who were hired first – who were able to see the last hired get paid the same amount as they were to receive – grumble. They assumed that they deserved more money. They had worked longer and harder. They had suffered more under the hot sun. They grumbled about being made equal to those who only worked an hour.

I've heard similar grumbling in congregations: "All those new people want to change things." "They don't know or appreciate our traditions." Even in anticipation of a growing church, I've had people say, "I don't think I'd like being in a thousand-member congregation." They grumble if the church grows, because it changes. They grumble when it shrinks, because it's not it used to be. Humans do a lot of grumbling.

There is truth in their grumbling. The 8-hour workers had worked longer and harder than the 1-hour workers. New members are not likely to even know the long traditions of a congregation. Shrinking congregations will eventually close up.

What they miss seeing is the grace of God. Everyone who worked in the vineyard was given enough money to buy food for their families that day. Everyone who joins the congregation is being graced by God through the Word and Sacraments. Even in shrinking congregations, God's grace is still proclaimed and experienced.

"Grace" means that God gives us what we don't deserve. Once we start thinking that we deserve what God gives, it's no longer grace. It's a reward for our good deeds or proper faith or decades of sitting through worship services – and some might have been a bit boring.

Jonah thought the Ninevites should be destroyed. They deserved it. They probably did deserve it. The first hired thought they should be paid more. They deserved it. They had worked much longer than the one-hour workers. They created more income for the land owner. We often think that people should get what they deserve. "They made their beds, let them lie in them," is often our attitude towards people who are in difficulties because of their own choices.

Grace isn't about what we deserve. It's about what God gives – what God gives to those who don't deserve it.

God gave the Ninevites a new life. The landowner gave everyone enough money to provide for their families that day. He also gave them a job to do – a purpose for being alive that day; rather than just standing around doing nothing.

God gave Jonah a bush to provide shade from the hot sun. He appreciated that plant and the shade it gave him.

God is, as Jonah confesses, a "gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment."¹ Part of God's compassion for Nineveh was to make sure that reluctant Jonah would go there. He couldn't escape God's call. The big fish made sure of that.

While we usually think that the book of Jonah is about Jonah and a fish, it's really a story about God – our God whose gracefulness can even extend to those we consider enemies. God can be so gracious that we might grumble about it – even get angry at God. God may not hate all the same people we hate.

The bush that provided shade for Jonah, dies. Jonah is sad at the death of the bush. God points out that if Jonah can have such feelings for a bush that he had no part in creating, shouldn't God have the same kinds of feelings towards all the people he created, even those who are living

¹ Jonah 4:2

in Nineveh? It would grieve God if they all should be destroyed, just as Jonah was grieved when the plant died. Just as Jonah would have done whatever he could to save that plant; so God did everything he could to save the people in Nineveh. That's the kind of compassionate, merciful, loving God we have. He cares for the people – a foreign, pagan town. If God cares that much for those people; how much more does he care for us, his own children, brought into his family through Jesus, his Son.

We, who sometimes act too much like Jonah and judge and condemn others. We, who sometimes act too much like those workers who worked all day long – we've been faithful Christians, sacrificing our time and money for the church all our lives, and we might resent those new converts or the new congregation down the road that seems to be more successful and prosperous than us.

We are not perfect people, but neither were the Ninevites. We learn from them about how gracious our God can be to imperfect people – including us. We are reminded once again that whatever good we have been given by God, is because of God's grace, not because we deserve it. We also learn that as God used a very reluctant Jonah to bring grace to undeserving people, so God will use us, even if we are bit reluctant, to make his mercy and compassion known throughout the world and in our neighborhoods, and in this house of worship.