

Jonah might just be one of the most relatable prophets in the whole Bible. Jonah does exactly what God asks him to do—and then gets mad because it worked. You know if you all responded as enthusiastically as Ninevah did after just one sermon, I'd print flyers, post it on our church sign, tell our DS Timote. Heck, I'd even run a victory lap around the entire property. Not Jonah. He goes outside the walls of Ninevah, sits down, and pouts. When Jonah witnessed God's miracle of grace his response is, "I don't like it."

Our last Fish Tale where Jonah pouts might a hit little close to home. Maybe we wouldn't go sit under a plant outside of Kingman, but I'm willing to bet that we'd be bothered if we found out that grace was extended to someone we don't think deserves it.

The way this story has gone so far, we shouldn't be surprised by how it ends, but it is a surprising ending. Nineveh listened. The people turned around. God showed mercy. Jonah? He's not celebrating. He's angry. The story ends with God asking Jonah a question without an answer. It's an unanswered question for us too. Should God not care about people, especially ones we don't like?

Grace is the best word on the planet when we are the recipients. We love to sing about grace and talk about it. We depend on grace every single day. We want grace when we have made a mistake, when we have said the wrong thing or a string of wrong things. We want grace for losing patience, taking the wrong road, needing another chance. We are easily convinced that grace is good when it flows in our direction. But that person who deserves judgment. God better not give grace to that person.

This is the uncomfortable truth we find in the last part of this story about Jonah. Jonah isn't upset because God failed. Jonah's upset because God was merciful. His lackluster, mediocre sermon worked, because the people responded. The city turned around. And Jonah went outside the city to sulk because God did exactly what he was afraid God would do.

Jonah knows exactly who God is. Says it right out loud. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishment. This is good theology. Jonah knows it by heart. But what he knows and what he believes are two different things. Jonah can describe God's mercy and still resents when and where God sends it.

You can believe in grace, sing about grace, and depend on grace. But you can still be tempted to draw a circle around who you think deserves it. Quietly deciding that some people are too far gone, too different, too difficult, or too undeserving. And friend, God comes to you with the same question asked of Jonah: do you love your anger more than you love God's mercy?
(Repeat)

This is hard, isn't it? The kind of question that creates silence. Are you holding onto a grudge? Do you know what it is like to remember what someone said, did, or how they treated you? How easy it to keep God's mercy generally ours, but not specifically to this person, that group, that city. Who do you hate? We know what it is like to want God to be merciful generally, but perhaps not too merciful specifically to that person, that group, or that place. Jonah 4 asks us to bring that part of ourselves into the light of God's grace.

And God continues to show mercy to Jonah. God does not shout him down. God does not punish him for being angry. God simply asks, "Is it right for you to be angry?" What a gentle question, one that gave Jonah a chance search inward, to look underneath his anger and ask, "What am I really holding onto here?"

Anger can serve as protection. Anger can protect our pride, our comfort, our prejudice and our need to be right. Jonah wanted God's mercy, but only for people like him. For people like them, Jonah wanted God's judgment. Too bad, so sad, your dad, because God's mercy is wider than Jonah's imagination or ours.

Almost 2500 years later, it is easy to point to Jonah and say, “How could he be so hard-hearted?” But what if we asked a different question? Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with Jonah?”, What if we asked these questions? “Where am I like Jonah?” Where do I want God to bless me but discipline her? Where do I want patience for myself but quick consequences for him? Where do I want room to grow while denying that same room to someone else?

Then God gives Jonah a living sermon illustration. The original object lesson. A plant grows up and gives Jonah shade. Jonah is happy about that. Then a worm kills the plant. The sun beats down, and Jonah is miserable again. Jonah grieves over a plant that he did not plant, or water, or grow. God’s lesson here? “Jonah, you care deeply about this plant. Can’t you understand that I care deeply about this city full of people and animals?”

What shade are you attached to? Routines, buildings, preferences, traditions, because that’s the way we’ve always done it? This isn’t to say that everything needs to change. But we must be careful of letting what makes us comfortable more important than how we care about God’s people. More important than loving them.

This isn’t easy because we can love our traditions, I can no longer imagine Christmas here without crismons. And shouldn’t we be grateful for faithful people who came before us. We can love our sanctuary, our songs, our fellowship, our ways of gathering, and our memories. But the plant in Jonah 4 reminds us that comfort is not the same as calling. Shade is not the same thing as mission. The question is not whether the plant was bad. The question is whether Jonah cared more about the plant than he cared about the people.

Being a United Methodists means having generous view of grace. There’s prevenient grace—God reaching for us before we even know how to reach back. There’s justifying grace—God forgiving and restoring us through Jesus Christ. And there’s sanctifying grace—God continuing to shape us into people who love God and neighbor more fully. Jonah 4 reminds us that sanctifying grace has to reach even the parts of us that still cling to resentment.

Prevenient grace is clearly at work in our Fish Tales. God was already concerned about Nineveh before Jonah ever walked through the streets. God's compassion did not begin when Jonah approved of it. Isn't that good news? God also reaches for us before we have everything figured out.

Through justifying grace God forgives, restores, and sets us right through Jesus Christ. This mercy cannot be earned by being impressive enough, polished enough, or religious enough. Mercy is God's gift. Jonah struggled because he wanted mercy to be measured out according to his human sense of fairness, not measured by the heart of God.

Sanctifying grace means God does not leave us where we are. Just like God kept working on Jonah, even after Jonah preached, even after Nineveh repented, even after Jonah got mad. God still kept asking questions. God was still inviting Jonah into a larger love. From where I sit, I would call this the most hopeful parts of the whole story: God keeps working not only on the obvious sinners in Nineveh, but on the reluctant servant sitting outside the city.

So the question is not just, "Can Nineveh receive mercy?" The question is also, "Can Jonah be changed by mercy?" And maybe the question for us today is, "Can we be changed by the same grace we preach, teach, sing, and pray about?"

Let me ask it this way: where might God be asking us to widen our compassion? Who have we quietly placed outside the reach of grace? What comfort are we guarding while God is pointing us toward people in need? Jonah 4 will not let us close the book with easy answers. It leaves us standing right in front of God's question.

For us today at St. John's United Methodist church, this question is a mission question. Are we called to receive grace and keep it to ourselves or are we are called to become channels of grace? We are called to be a channel of grace. (Say together) As I say at the end of the service every week, We are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This isn't just the parts of the world we understand, approve of, or find comfortable.

This mission is not abstract. Trust me, your mission shows up in the way you talk about people who are different than you. It shows up in how you welcome new people. It shows up in whether you are willing to fully listen before you judge. It shows up in whether St. John's is more concerned with preserving shade than extending mercy. The world has plenty of churches who sits outside the city complaining about who God might forgive. The world needs more churches that sincerely carry the compassion of Christ into our city with humility, courage, and no question of deservedness.

God did not give up on Nineveh, and God did not give up on Jonah. God's mercy reached the lost city, and the angry prophet. This means there is hope for every city, every neighbor, every enemy, and every heart—including yours.

Who gives us a clear glass look at mercy today? Jesus Christ. Jesus did not stand outside the city waiting for people to get what they deserved. Jesus entered the suffering of the world. He stretched out his arms. He offered forgiveness even to those who did not know what they were doing. If we say we are followers of Jesus, then we cannot sit at a distance hoping God will judge the world. We must reach out toward the world with holy love.

Are you here today needing mercy? Hear this good news: God's mercy is for you. Are you struggling to forgive? Hear this invitation: God can work in that place too. Are you tired of a world that seems eternally divided and hard-hearted? Hear this calling: God still needs people of grace to go into places of need. So if you came today and now realize that you have been sitting with Jonah outside the city, here this. "God is not finished with you either." Say that to each other.

The book of Jonah ends without telling us what Jonah did next. We don't know whether he got up and walked back into the city. We don't know whether he let God soften his heart. We don't know whether he ever learned to rejoice over mercy. Perhaps the ending is open because God wants us to answer the question for ourselves. Will we stay outside the city with our resentment, or will we follow the God whose mercy is wider than our anger?

Let us pray. Gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, search our hearts. Show us where anger has narrowed our compassion. Forgive us for the times we have wanted mercy for ourselves but judgment for others. By your sanctifying grace, make us more like You Son Jesus. Teach us to love the people you love, serve the world you are redeeming, and rejoice whenever your mercy makes all things new. Amen.