

“A Whale of a Tale”
“From Grudge to Grace”

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I am thinking this morning about grace. It’s a beautiful word that lives at the heart of our faith and yet, there seems to be something within us that is reluctant to accept the invitation it extends. In a culture built upon rule keeping and achievement, a culture that specializes in keeping score in order to determine who is acceptable and who is not, grace is a concept that is often suspect. Like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, we become easily upset or even incensed when those who have been irresponsible and unaccountable are not only included on the party guest list, but are, actually treated as the celebrated guest.

Yet, this theme of grace is not limited to one or two teaching moments in scripture. Without question, it is the thread that is woven through the tapestry that is the story of our faith. A quick survey of the parables or teachings of Jesus makes one thing very clear: God plays by a different set of rules than many or most of us are accustomed to using. Many, if not most of us, are inclined to want play the role of judge and jury, deciding just who is acceptable and who is not, who is redeemable and who is beyond redemption. In other words, we are inclined to want to play the role that belongs to God.

Certainly Jonah felt that way.

The story of Jonah, as you may know, is an ancient folk tale that illustrates the tension between divine grace and human judgment. With a rather vivid and creative imagination—not to mention a good dose of humor—the unknown writer weaves a tale that calls into question the narrow nationalism and private provincialism of the Jewish people. In the short span of four rather brief chapters, the writer creatively exposes the prejudice of their pride and challenges them consider another point of view—namely God’s point of view.

You may remember that Jonah was not exactly a proponent of grace. In fact, when God called Jonah to go to the City of Nineveh and speak a prophetic word against it, Jonah is not only a little reluctant, he is downright defiant! Rather than set sail for this capital city of Assyria, Jonah boards a ship and heads in the opposite direction toward the City of Tarshish.

The reason for his defiance can be found in the fact that Jonah, being a devout Jew, wanted nothing to do with the Ninevites. They were, after all, the ancient enemy of Israel, the same nation that had captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel’s capital city of Samaria. In Jonah’s mind, the last place in the world that he would go would be on a preaching mission to Nineveh. They were “foreigners” to be avoided at all costs and so he made the strategic choice to defy God’s call by heading in the other direction.

But Jonah soon discovers that he simply can't outrun the reach of the God who had called him. A storm comes up and with waves crashing over their boat, the sailors aboard cry out in fear to their gods as they began to throw heavy cargo overboard to lighten the load.

Meanwhile, Jonah is found fast asleep below deck. The captain wakes him up and tells him that he should make his appeal to his own God. Believing that the storm reflects the wrath of some divine power in response to human action, the sailors then cast lots to determine who is to blame for this impending calamity. As fate would have it, the lot falls upon Jonah.

They then ask him to tell them who he is, where he is from and why this storm has come upon them. Jonah identifies himself to them as a "Hebrew who worships the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." The sailors became even more frightened when Jonah admitted to them that he was fleeing from the presence of his God.

"What shall we do," they wanted to know, **"in order to make the sea calm down for us?"**

Jonah, knowing, at this point, that he could not out run God, replied that they should pick him up and throw him overboard—and then the sea would calm down for them. But, to their credit, the sailors did not want to do that. They didn't want to be guilty of shedding innocent blood and so they rowed as hard as they could to try to return to land. It was only when they were unable to do so and at their wits end that they reluctantly picked Jonah up and threw him overboard. When the waves became calm, the sailors interpreted this as a true sign of God's majesty and we are told that they **"feared the Lord even more, and they offered sacrifice to the Lord and made vows."**

As we follow this narrative, it is important not to miss the not so subtle point that, in the course of this crisis at sea, the non-Israelite sailors would, through their experience, make vows to the God of Israel. Their own gods, according to the story, have proven ineffective and unable to save them.

As the story continues, we are told that **"the Lord provided"** a large fish that swallowed Jonah and it was there, in the belly of the great fish, that Jonah resided for three days and three nights. And it was there, in the belly of the fish, that Jonah finally came to himself. If ever there was a reason to come to oneself, I imagine that it would be hard to top being in the belly of a fish!

Rather than offer his prayer of repentance and lament, however, Jonah prays a beautiful prayer—a Psalm of thanksgiving in which Jonah reaffirms his trust in God and his desire to be faithful to God's call. It is then that the great fish spits Jonah out upon dry land. And it is there that God comes calling a second time, telling Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh in order to proclaim God's message to the inhabitants of that city.

Suffice it to say, Jonah, after his ordeal in the belly of the fish, is a bit more amenable to doing what God has instructed him to do! He dutifully makes the trek to Nineveh and there delivers his prophetic message, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed!" Now, I imagine that it was the kind of message that Jonah rather enjoyed delivering. After

all, he must have relished the thought of announcing the destruction of this hated enemy of his people! He must have felt a special pleasure in predicting their downfall.

But then, the unexpected happened. The word of God that he proclaimed was actually heard and the response was immediate and impressive. The people, we are told, believed in God and repented by proclaiming a fast and putting on sack cloth as a sign of their remorse. When the King heard Jonah's message, he too repented and proclaimed a fast for the entire city in the hope that God would change God's mind.

Well, as it turned out, God's mind was changed. Instead of punishment and destruction, there would be reconciliation and new life for the people of Nineveh—and everyone was happy...except for God's emissary, Jonah. You see, Jonah had been banking on the destruction of the Ninevites. As foreigners and hated enemies, they had no place in Jonah's thinking. And so Jonah challenges God once more: **"Is this not what I said when I was in my own country? This is why I ran away from you by heading to Tarshish...For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."** (Jonah 4: 2)

God then raises the critical question—not only for Jonah—but for anyone who happens to read this ancient text: **"Is it right for you to be angry?"** Jonah insists that yes, he has every right to be angry enough to die. If God was not willing to play by Jonah's rules, the Jonah didn't want to play at all. He wanted to die and be done with it.

Intriguingly, this ancient tale does not end on a neatly resolved, happily ever after note. Instead, it ends very much unresolved with a question that God asks not only of Jonah, but also of the reader, both past and present: **"Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?"**

With this question, the story ends and we are left to wonder about how Jonah might have responded. For that matter, we are also left to wonder about how we ourselves might respond. Will we answer this question with gracefully or grudgingly? Will we allow God's unconditional love to be the template for our lives or will we insist upon our own template—one that is created out of our own ground rules for what is fair and acceptable?

While very little is actually known about the writer of the Book of Jonah or even the time period in which this story was written, we do know this much: **The writer created this rather extravagant tale as a way of illustrating a primary point to the people of Israel. The writer wanted his Jewish readers to know that God's love was greater than the boundaries that they were inclined to create around their faith.**

He wanted them to know that God's acceptance was not limited only to the House of Israel. He wanted them to know that there was room in God's circle even for those "foreigners" who happened to be ancient enemies.

It was, in many respects, a remarkable message for the time, a message that, no doubt, some simply did not want to hear. For, like Jonah, they were convinced that God was a provincial God who was quick to draw the lines between those acceptable and those not, between those who were “in” and those who were “out.” Yet, the fact that this remarkable story was preserved in the canon of scripture is a testimony to its lasting value.

No one could argue that its message isn’t just as important today as it was at the time that it was written. If anything, I suspect, it is even more important, more critical in this present time of unrest, of exclusion, of prejudice and bias. It is so ironic that in a world made smaller by the advance of our technology, the barriers that divide us are, seemingly, becoming larger. In a time in which we have the potential to be so much closer, we find ourselves being pulled further apart by the forces that choose to draw lines and borders and boundaries.

In Don Henley’s song, “The Heart of the Matter,” there’s a line that speaks to this current reality:

**Ah, these times are so uncertain
There’s a yearning undefined
And people filled with rage
We all need a little tenderness
How can love survive in such a graceless age?**

That is, I think, the real question that we face this morning. How can love survive in this graceless age? Nearly everywhere we turn, there is tension and turmoil, finger pointing and accusation. And the great tragedy is that we seem to be so trapped in this escalating cycle of retribution and judgment that we seem to be powerless to break it—not only in our personal relationships, but also, in our national and international relationships as well.

Who will have the courage to break the cycle? Who will have the conviction to move from grudge to grace? Who will have the spiritual strength to play by the ground rules of grace? Will it be you? In what specific ways might you be willing to be more “grace-full” in your attitude and your action? What are the grudges that you need to let go of in order to fully move into the embrace of grace?

In John Drinkwater’s play, “Abraham Lincoln,” there is a conversation between Lincoln and a woman who asks him if he has any news about the war raging between north and south. Lincoln responds that, “Yes, there is news of victory. But they lost 2700 men and we lost 800.” The woman was ecstatic. “Splendid!” she replied. “That’s wonderful news!” With a grimace, Lincoln repeated, “3500 men were killed!” The woman replied, “You must not talk that way, Mr. President. There were only 800 lives that mattered.” To which Lincoln responded, **“Madam, the world is bigger than your heart.”**

And therein lies the problem that we often bump up against as human beings. The world that God has created is bigger than our hearts. The world, as God sees it, isn’t divided up into the acceptable and the unacceptable, those who are “in” and those who are “out.”

As the Apostle Paul would remind us in one of the revolutionary statements in all of scripture, **“In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...There is no longer Jew or Greek...There is no longer slave or free...There is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”**

The world as God sees it, is a seamless whole without borders or boundaries. The people of Nineveh mattered to God every bit as much as the people of Jerusalem. And so it is that the people of Pyongyang or Tehran matter just as much to God as the people of San Francisco or New York. From a God’s eye point of view, there is, you see, room for everyone at the table—the respectable and responsible older brother and yes, the utterly irresponsible prodigal son.

God’s ground rule of grace effectively challenged Jonah’s inclination to play the part of God—just as it challenges our own inclination to do the same. Some things, you see, never change. And while we are left to wonder whether or not Jonah ever grasped the grace that God extended, the real question, I think, is whether or not we ourselves will grasp that grace...whether or not we ourselves will choose to move from grudge to grace, from exclusion to inclusion, from retribution to reconciliation.

That, I think, is the real question before us this morning. How will you answer?

Amen.