

Pastor Roy's sermon from September 21, 2014

The Ninevites had a different religion, they were ruthless conquerors, they practiced exile by dispersion to the eradication of the cultural identity of the conquered, unlike the Babylonians who kept the exiles together. Jonah is angry that God is merciful. Jonah cares for his own personal comfort, shade from the sun. Jonah is driven by his own personal sense of justice. He wants revenge. He is afraid, he is angry. God is unjust.

If there are prophets in Eastern Syria and Western Iraq today, they are facing the same emotions as Jonah was 2k 700 years ago. The Assyrians acted a bit like ISIS. But lest we think that the people from that part of the world are uniquely callous, let us remember the practices of Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, the Khmer Rouge in the 70s, the Rwandan Genocide in the 90s, the ongoing racial and religious struggles in central Africa for land, the genocides following the breakdown of Yugoslavia, the trouble in Palestine, the Armenian genocide in Turkey 100 years ago—events denied by the Turkish government to this day which led to the coining of the term, “genocide,” and finally and most close to home, the horribly unjust way we treated African Americans and Native American Indians which quietly continues to this day. I think it is fair to say that all tribes and nations have participated in or benefited from some form of violent injustice or genocide in their history and we don't usually have to go back in time that far to find it. We are all guilty.

Jonah hates the Ninevites and wants to see them destroyed. The Assyrian army was a formidable foe, despite the advances of their judicial system and social order. They demanded an annual tax of cities, or they would be burned and destroyed. Then, when they conquered a people, they uprooted and moved or killed anyone seen as a threat, especially if they were repeat offenders. Israel was always on everyone's bucket list because the supply routes to Egypt and Northern Africa all went through their territory. Israel and Judah were notoriously and stubbornly independent, or so they wished to be. So, Israel does not want to hear talk of forgiveness and mercy toward their enemies. The Assyrians did not practice mercy, why should Israel care about their repentance and spiritual wellbeing? Jonah is a prophesy about Israel, not just of a little man with a temper as big as his grudge.

Jesus' parable of the land owner relates here. As the day goes on, the landowner needs more and more help. He pays everyone the same wage regardless of how long they have worked. To those working a short time, it is life-giving: They will have a wage to bring home to their families. Food for the children and the great-grandparents. The day long laborers see the generosity toward the latecomers and figure that perhaps they will get double pay. When they get the standard pay, they are disappointed and cry “foul!” The landowner reminds them that they have received a fair wage and his generosity toward the latecomers is his choice. This might well be one of the most foundational parables in the Gospel. Grace as pure gift upsets the responsible and hard working.

Remember Mary and Martha. Martha wants Mary to do her share of the work instead of sitting and enjoying conversation with Jesus. Jesus gently corrects her—conversation is more important than the work. The work can wait. Grace is always waiting and ready. No score keeping, no winners or losers. Grace is a dance for all who will join with free and compassionate hearts and minds.

Jesus often makes the point that those who are surprised by grace appreciate it the most. So if there were a roundtable conversation between God, and Jonah, and the Ninevites who have just been forgiven and granted life despite their injustices and violent behavior, who is in the best mood at that gathering? Who is most appreciative? Will it be Jonah who has been forgiven for his stingy attitude—for his greed to keep all of God's grace for himself? Or will it be the Ninevites who can now go on their way sharing grace-filled life interspersed with occasional, ongoing acts of violence and injustice, as is our practice as well?

Is part of the story a reminder that those who feel religiously and morally superior to their sinful neighbors are most in danger of being ungrateful, and therefore, out of communion with God? Are we in touch with our own occasional ingratitude?

So let us freely confess our sin, our complicity with the evils of our day, and throw in our lot with those to whom we are inclined to deny grace. We are in this together. Surely it is not a matter of who deserves what. Those we despise and hate--and yes, they are out there--those very ones can teach us gratitude and joy in a merciful, free loving God. They are in prison. They are poor. They might be manipulative. They are wealthy beyond imagination. They enjoy using and abusing their power, however it comes to them. They enjoy annihilating their perceived enemies. They are addicted—to drugs, sex, and violence. And we enjoy our status, we enjoy our freedom, we enjoy our relative wealth and security. We enjoy our moral high ground.

Jonah and Jesus call us to celebrate mercy and let go of what we never had in the first place. Let us celebrate the truly free nature—giving and receiving—of grace. This dance, this banquet, this joy. The more we give, the more we receive. The price of this freedom is the letting go of our illusions of moral, spiritual, and economic high ground—walls which prevent us from embracing mercy and enjoying other's new found freedom. Amen.