

May 28, 2017
Lesson 13: Jonah 4
God's Pervasive Love

Context:

Today we look at the last chapter in the book of Jonah. In the four short chapters, we have covered an incredible journey. A man runs from God, gets caught in a storm, is swallowed and spat out by a large fish, and then goes on to convert an entire city of one of the most violent empires in the ancient world. It is almost better than an action adventure movie on TNT.

But the story ends on an odd note with an interesting twist. After all that hard work of preaching and prophesying in the streets of Nineveh, Jonah is bitter. And after he tastes the bitterness in his mouth, he becomes angry. Jonah is angry with God because Jonah felt as if that was the plan all along. Jonah knew that God was compassionate and merciful. So much so that he would not destroy the people.

For some reason this anger and bitterness leads Jonah to be so angry that he even asks why he should live. He ignores God's voice and builds a hut outside the city to see if suddenly God will change God's mind and Nineveh will finally get what it deserves. Maybe God will show Jonah the doom and destruction that Jonah was anticipating.

But God has a sense of humor and likes to even use a little mischief to get across the wideness of God's mercy and grace. Next to the hut grows a shrub where Jonah can rest. It is comfortable and allows for a little shade in the heat. In the morning though, some kind of worm chews on the shrub and so it dies. And then there is the sun rising and a dry wind. Jonah cries out again in anger to just die.

After they go back and forth, God makes a point about the shrub. God says that just as Jonah pities a shrub that he didn't put there that God can also pity Nineveh, a great city with thousands of people who need guidance and direction. God doesn't even forget the animals in the litany!

Thus ends the book of Jonah. This book is considered to be not only the story of the prophet Jonah, but is also a part of the writings in the Old Testament called Wisdom literature. Wisdom literature revealed philosophical truths that were to help the people understand more about life and not so much have the right answers as to have the right questions. These questions are about the paradoxes in life and how God might be at work in the midst of them. How can God love and spare even an enemy people of Israel? How does God deal with an unrighteous people? These are some of the questions that the author is asking their audience to contemplate.

Application:

I enjoy reading this part of the book of Jonah because it shows that Jonah is just as human as the rest of us. He is called by God to do something, runs from God, repents from running from God, obeys God, and then even has the boldness to be angry with God. All in all, he sounds a lot like us.

We especially see the disgruntled part of asking God why God continues to put up with difficult and bad people. It would have just been a lot easier if God had zapped Nineveh and made sure that Jonah could have had a show. But instead, God chose to pity the city and spare it. It was almost anticlimactic for the end of Jonah's journey.

But isn't it what we all may secretly wish from time to time; that God would just get rid of the people we do not like. We have people that are our "enemies." I am not just talking about terrorists or dangerous criminals. These are people we have to deal with daily and cannot be easily whisked out of sight.

I am talking about the co-worker who you struggle to get along with because they get the position you wanted so badly. There's the friend who is your "Jones" neighbor and seems to get ahead of you in every facet of life. Or there is that church group or individual who is always up to something or gabbing about some cause.

At times those people may be hard to love. They get to your very last nerve or push that button that you've tried to hide. We might even secretly wish for their downfall. That co-worker gets demoted at work. The "Jones" neighbor hits a snag in their success. The people in that group or that person leaves the church or gets plans ruined by someone else in the church.

It is easy to get into that state or desire of wishing that someone would "get what's coming to them." We may even feel like God owes it to us for our devotion and morality. But what if we were to consider that God loves even "those people" and that they themselves are broken and have some deep pains we don't even know. The co-worker has extra mouths at home to feed and they go the extra mile in hopes of more money to take care of family. The friend who wants to be the "it" family doesn't have a lot of real friends and think things will get them there. Or that group or person has a story that fuels their passion for why they do what they do at church. You may never know.

But instead of wishing for the wrath of God to visit them, try to think about how Jesus views them. I will never forget having a conversation with an older pastor about how to respond to people who are really broken in our churches and seem to take out their anger or hostility on other people. My question was: "How do you pastor them?" His response: "I try to think about how God views them. God knows them inside and outside and knows all the places they hurt. And then I think about Jesus and how he ministered to all sorts of people simply by loving them. Through it all, God created all people and loves all people. Even though we are all sinners with all our cracks and imperfection."

For me, it was an epiphany. Instead of lashing back out at those people or wishing calamity upon them, I was to look at them and ask: "How would Jesus respond to them?" It's not easy to do at times and I think we all may struggle. We may even have to stand up to people if we have a major issue with them. A lot of it depends on our tone and way of addressing those people and "speaking the truth in love." Speaking the truth in love isn't sarcastic, terse, or accusatory. Even difficult people deserve respect even if they do not give it. Our Lord calls for us to do certain things for all people including difficult people: to love them, pray for them, and hear their story. It is how God works with Jonah and it is how God works with all of us. Even though we are sinners, we have a God who never gives up on us and never lets us go.