

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:5-11)

Do You Rejoice in God's Mercy?

Have you ever been driving in heavy traffic and some jerk cuts you off because wherever he's going is so much more important than wherever you're going? If you're like me, you get a little mad and you wonder where the cops are. Well, what would happen if a mile or two down the road, you saw that guy pulled over by the police? How would you feel? Again, if you're like me, it might be hard to suppress a little fist pump. "Yes! Way to go cops!" That really isn't a God pleasing attitude. God doesn't call us to walk around hoping that all those sinners out there get what they deserve. But what about when they really deserve it? What about when they're the enemies of the gospel and they've worked long and hard to stamp out the truth? What then? How would we Christians feel if some of our biggest opponents went down in flames? If the liberal, "you can't trust the Bible" crowd suddenly were discredited and mocked the way we are often mocked? If the gay-marriage-abortion-rights voices were suddenly silenced and humiliated? How would we feel if God visited a judgment on them here on this earth? If some plague or some other unmistakable and well deserved act of God struck them? It might be hard for us to suppress our glee. But is that really the attitude God wants us to have?

I.

What about when God forgives people like that? How do we feel about that? Are we willing to announce to the people who've made it hardest to practice our faith that Jesus died for them and God forgives them? **Do you rejoice in God's mercy? Are you glad he forgives the enemies of the Church?** The Old Testament prophet Jonah faced exactly that question. You all know the story of Jonah. God called him to go to Nineveh and call the people there to repent. Jonah didn't want to go, so he got on a ship and sailed in the other direction. God sent a great storm that threatened to sink the ship. Jonah told the sailors to throw him overboard to save themselves. Eventually they did and the sea became calm in an instant. Then came the most famous part of the story: the whale. God prepared a great fish that swallowed Jonah and for three days he lived inside it. Then he prayed to God and God had the fish vomit him out onto the seashore.

Let's dispense right now with all the biology questions about how Jonah could pass through the throat of a whale, which is really only a few inches wide and how he could live and breathe inside its stomach, with no air and all the digestive acids there. This was a miracle. The God who made the heavens and the earth made this happen and he doesn't bother to explain how he did it. More important for our point today is what happened afterwards. Jonah went to Nineveh. He preached that God was going to destroy the city in forty days. The whole city repented in sackcloth and ashes and God relented.

That was precisely why Jonah didn't want to go. He knew that God forgives. In fact, he knew that God sent him there so that they would repent and he could forgive them. Jonah didn't want that to happen. He wanted the Lord to smite that city like he did Sodom and Gomorrah more than a thousand years before. Why did Jonah want that? Because Nineveh was the capital of Israel's enemy, Assyria. At this time, the Assyrians were making life very difficult of Israel and eventually, they were going to destroy the Northern Kingdom, taking the ten northern tribes into exile. They would never return. Even the Southern Kingdom was going to suffer warfare and bloodshed at their hands. Jonah desperately wanted them to get what they had coming.

His heart just wasn't in the same place that God's heart was. God wanted Nineveh to repent and be saved even though they were the enemies of his people. And God expected Jonah to have the same compassion. When he didn't, God arranged for a little life lesson. In a huff, Jonah went out of the city and built himself a crude shelter and waited to see if God was going to do anything at all to those rotten Assyrians. Remember, this was the Middle East – it's modern day Iraq. The sun is hot there. Jonah's shelter could only block so much of the sun. So God caused a leafy vine to spring up overnight and provide additional shade. That was a real blessing to Jonah. But God let him get just a taste of how nice that shade was, and then the next night, he sent a worm to eat the plant's root so that it withered. The sun beat down on Jonah and the hot desert wind blew in his face and he was miserable.

Then God said to Jonah, **“Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?”** Jonah's anger that God refused to punish Nineveh was really a criticism of God and the way he runs the world. Shouldn't God want all people to be saved? Shouldn't we share that desire?

How often don't we wish that all those unbelievers out there would get what they have coming? And, they do have God's judgment coming. On Judgment Day, God is going to punish the enemies of the gospel and the persecutors of his Church and we are going to rejoice in what he does. And yet, while we're here, God calls us to share his compassion on the lost, even when they're enemies of the gospel. God calls us to recognize that many people are like the people of Nineveh. They aren't the leaders who know us and hate us. They're followers who don't know their right hand from their left. They follow what the world tells them. They adopt the attitudes that they see and hear all around them without stopping to think about what God really says. Does that mean they're innocent? No. And God will judge all those who don't repent. But he wants to save them.

We should want that, too, even for the ones who make our lives hardest in this world. What attitude should we have toward those people who label the Bible's teaching on homosexuality “hate speech”? Who make Christianity the only religion that can be persecuted? What attitude should we have toward university professors who try to entice our children away from their faith? What attitude should we have toward Islamists who chant “death to the infidels” and they mean us? Our first prayer for them should be that they repent. And if they do, God calls us to rejoice. That is where the rubber meets the road. Can we even imagine rejoicing and welcoming people like that into our congregation because now they believe? Or are we like Jonah, and we just want to see them get what they deserve?

That is not the love that Christ showed. And it is a sinful attitude. But like he did to Jonah, God nudges us toward repentance. God forgives us for that desire to see our enemies get theirs and that desire to pump our fists at them on their way down to hell. He reminds us that in Christ, all that sin is gone. Jesus died and rose to take away even our lovelessness and our desire for revenge. God has forgiven us. And in love, God teaches us a new attitude, one that reflects his. Have that attitude. Pray for and hope for the repentance of every enemy of the Church. Pray that they will gather with us around the throne of Christ.

II.

It's fairly easy, sitting here in church today, feeling safe and surrounded by believers, to say, “I want that.” But how do we show it? By being a part of the effort that Jonah didn't want to be a part of: sharing the good news about Jesus. **Do you rejoice in God's mercy? Are you willing to share his concern for the lost?**

God sent Jonah hundreds of miles from his home to preach to people who were hostile to the Jewish nation and offensive to Jewish sensibilities. Would you be willing to go, if God sent you? Most of us are past the point in our lives when God is going to send us to a foreign mission. But would you encourage your children to consider the ministry? Would you be willing to talk to people about their Savior? When the Board of Stewardship and Outreach announces efforts to reach out, will you be willing to take part? If you're not the person to actually do the talking, are you willing to give of your time and of your financial resources to support reaching out with the gospel here and throughout the world?

And if not, why not? I really don't think that too many people here have the attitude the Jonah had: we do want people to hear the gospel. But I do wonder how many of us have an attitude that parallels his attitude about that vine. When it withered and Jonah was roasting in the sun, he wanted to die. God came to him and asked, **“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”** Jonah said, **“I do. I am angry enough to die.”** Then God pointed out that he cared about a wild vine that grew up overnight and died overnight. He didn't plant it. In another situation, he might have considered it a weed and pulled it out of his garden. But because he

didn't have the shade from that vine, he was furious with God and he just wanted to die. Yet he didn't care about the eternal destiny of 120,000 people.

Jonah cared about himself and his comfort and all that he had gone through to come to Nineveh and about his hope of seeing his enemies destroyed more than he cared about God's love for the lost. More than he cared about the lost themselves. I wonder how true that is for us? Maybe we aren't having temper tantrums about vines, but how much time and energy do we spend complaining about traffic? About bad roads? About how unreasonable our bosses are and how expensive gas is and how hard it is to parent in our society? Do we spend that much time and energy being concerned about the lost? How much money do we spend on cable and internet connections? Do we give even that much to proclaim the gospel here and throughout the world?

Numbers don't tell the whole story. But this week, I got a report on congregational giving in our district. There is no congregation of our size in the district that gives as little to missions as we do. There are many much smaller congregations that give more. Again, numbers don't tell the whole story. But is it possible that we are more concerned with ourselves, with our lives and our comfort and what we care about than we are with reaching out with the gospel? If that is true of us, it is a serious sin. In Jonah's case, the sin was so serious, that God didn't tell us how Jonah responded to his rebuke. The book of Jonah ends with the questions God asked. If Jonah wrote the book, clearly he repented. But doesn't ending on that question underline how seriously God takes our bad attitudes?

The only thing that God takes more seriously is the work of Jesus. The truth is, no missionary, no pastor or teacher, no lay leader, no member in the pew ever was perfectly committed to preaching the gospel. Even the most committed minister and the most committed member still has a sinful heart that sometimes wants to worry about me. But Jesus was perfect in his concern for the lost. He committed his entire life to the cause of the gospel. He preached it personally. He gave up all the comforts of home so that he could travel the hot and dusty highways of Palestine without even a vine to give him shade. He commissioned apostles to carry that message forward as missionaries and as founders of the New Testament Church. God awards that perfect love Christ showed to us. Then Christ took his commitment to the lost to the ultimate extreme: Jesus laid down his life so that we, the lost, will live. He suffered hell and all that our sins deserve. He died for you. He died for me. He died for every sinner that will ever live and for every time we loved anything more than we loved him. He died for all the times we weren't willing to personally share the gospel or to sacrifice our comfort to support the gospel. Then he rose and wiped all that sin away now and forever. We are forgiven and free.

Only in Christ's love and forgiveness for us do we find a true concern for the lost. Only when we contemplate how much God has loved us and given for us are we prepared to dedicate our time, our talents and our financial resources to the work of the Lord. It is a gift of God to love the lost, a gift God worked overtime to develop in Jonah, a gift that God is working to develop in us, too. God has loved you. God has loved the entire world. Share his compassion. Rejoice when he forgives. Be a part of sharing that good news, here and throughout the world. Amen.