

January 24, 2021  
Third Sunday of Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5,10  
Psalm 62:6-14  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
Mark 1:14-20

---

There is a line from a children's song that I think is very appropriate for today. It's from the Veggie Tales. Maybe you know the cartoons I am talking about. They are these animated vegetables that sing and dance and tell important stories about character and good values. Not to mention, they know a heck of a lot about the bible. As the kids were growing up, we watched them all the time and knew them by heart.

In fact, when I was in seminary we had to take this huge exam called Bible Content. You couldn't graduate without passing it. I studied for weeks quizzing myself on every detail of the Bible. But when exam day came all the facts felt like a muddle of random events that took place somewhere in a sandy desert, with some kings and prophets that I couldn't quite recall. It was everyone's exam nightmare come true. So I did what any good biblical scholar would do in seminary – I started to run through in my head all of the plots of Veggie Tales. I'm not joking. Those cheery little singing vegetables saved my life and my grade. Long story short, I passed.

So, today, I am going to teach you one line from the Veggie Tales sing-a-long about Jonah. It's goes like this...

Compassion and mercy  
From me to you and you to me  
Exactly what God wants to see.

It is a beautiful theological statement that sums up the entirety of Jonah. It's a statement about second chances and our ability to allow those second chances to shape who we are.

Jonah is a complicated story. However, our reading this morning is brief. We only get a small piece of the narrative and to really understand the importance of this story it's worth reading the book of Jonah in its entirety. It's only 4 chapters after all. But, I will give you a short recap this morning to get you up to speed.

Jonah is called by God to preach a message of repentance to the people of Nineveh. They weren't the best of folks, the bible describes them as wicked. They were known enemies of Israel. They were not chosen people. They were foreigners and sinners. Needless to say, Jonah was not a fan. However, God wanted to give these people a second chance, a chance to do better, a chance to change their ways.

But, these were Jonah's enemies. He was not interested in helping out those kinds of people and so he runs away and gets on a boat. We know what happens. Storms kick up and the sailors on the boat are terrified. They wonder what Jonah has done to cause God's disapproval. Jonah admits that he didn't follow God's request of him and asks to be thrown overboard as a way to

appease God for his wrongdoing. But, God isn't going to let him run away from his responsibility that easily.

And, of course, you know what happens next. Jonah is swallowed up by a large fish and from inside that fish he begs for God's help. He promises to change and get it right this time, to do what God wants him to do. This is where our reading for today picks up. God decides to give Jonah a second chance.

God doesn't give up on Jonah. Instead, God has hope and faith that Jonah will do what is right. God trusts him and accepts him with all of his flaws and shortcomings. That's what second chances are all about and Jonah is granted that chance when he needed it the most. To Jonah's credit he follows through and warns the people of Nineveh, his enemies, to repent from their ways. And they do. We are then told that God changes his mind and relents and indeed gives the people of Nineveh a second chance.

This is about where the story stops most of the time – at least in the version I always heard growing up. It's the happy ending we all like. Right? Everybody lives happily ever after. Yet, that is not the end. Chapter 4 tells us that Jonah is indignant. He is furious, angry at God for the second chance that was given to his enemies. He says to God, "I knew you were a tender, compassionate god, slow to anger, rich in faithful love, who relents about inflicting disaster." He is so distraught about God's compassion towards his enemies, that Jonah tells God he wants to die. Jonah is so opposed to his enemies receiving the slightest bit of grace that he proclaims to God that is better to die than to live. And God simply asks, "Are you right to be angry?"

Here is the richness of this story. Jonah is wrestling with how God could love someone that he, himself hated. Questioning why anyone would help those people over there, those people not like himself. For Jonah, it would have been easier if God chose sides and played favorites. Of course, he wanted that side to be with him.

It's a struggle that we probably all know too well. Those moments we find ourselves wondering how to have compassion on our enemies. Wanting God's grace for ourselves but not wanting it to be so freely given to someone we do not accept or trust.

But that's what second chances are all about. Often it's the grace we feel we don't deserve. The kindness that we didn't expect. The acceptance we are humbled by. God gives it to us every day. And God expects us to do the same for others. Remember the song:

Compassion and mercy  
From me to you and you to me  
Exactly what God wants to see.

Yet, I wonder if life is really as simple as the song. How are we to reconcile the "from me to you and you to me" part of the song? If we are honest, most of us would rather run away, like Jonah than address the problem at hand, to be with our enemies, to listen, and to heal.

The world we live in is complicated and the issues so layered. It's important to state that when we talk about second chances and compassion and mercy we aren't saying that the victim is to turn a blind eye and stay in an unhealthy, harmful situation. It doesn't mean that we excuse patterns of abuse, neglect, addiction, or any other form of harmful behavior. It doesn't mean that we ignore dishonesty from our leaders and unethical choices of those in power. It doesn't mean that we allow discrimination and hate to prevail in communities, in our places of business, or in our schools.

Offering compassion and mercy does not call us to stay in those cycles. It does, however, call us to make known the issues and to support the change that needs to take place. That's the second chance in action.

Like Jonah, the people of Nineveh had to make the commitment to change their ways, to right the wrongs, and turn to God. I imagine for the people of Nineveh, and for Jonah, this took a lot of work and a lot of humility. Change is not easy.

And I truly love the fact that we never hear if Jonah resolves his anger. We don't know if he was ever able to reconcile his struggle with God. But, we do know he listened to God (eventually) even though it was deeply challenging. Even though finding compassion within himself meant facing his enemies and trusting that God's goodness was bigger than he could understand. Maybe he left angry. Maybe he left frustrated or confused. But to me, the important thing is that he did what was right. He did what God called him to do. And in that faithful action, goodness emerged and hearts were changed.

There is nothing simple about compassion and mercy. I wish we could all just take the words of the song to heart:

Compassion and mercy  
From me to you and you to me  
Exactly what God wants to see.

But the truth is, it takes work. Faithful, courageous, honest work. But, second chances are worth it. Amen.