

***Senior Pastor's Remarks:***

How often do you sit down and read an entire book from the Bible? I've got a great one for you: Jonah. It's only four chapters, and well worth the amount of time it takes to read this humorous, provocative story.

Jonah is unique among prophetic literature. The book is about a prophet, but it contains very little of his prophecy. In fact, we might think of Jonah as a disgruntled employee. He has listened to his boss (God) in the past. He knows God well. We see this knowledge when God sends Jonah to go proclaim a word of repentance to Ninevah. In response, Jonah tries to run from the task, rather than complete it dutifully. You see, Jonah has understood God to be gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. These characteristics are good in the abstract, but frustrating to Jonah, given his message of warning. The people of Ninevah don't deserve God's kindness, or so Jonah thinks. If he goes into that great city, talking about some big, powerful God, only to have that God extend mercy and kindness, he's going to look like a fool. The funny thing is, Jonah ends up needing those same things from God in the story. Jonah is a story of one of God's more reluctant servants, who does just about anything he can to get in his own way.

The reason you should read Jonah for yourself is because in four short chapters, readers can see a compelling figure who represents a substantial part of the human experience. We are also tempted to run from our obligations, particularly those which we know will be difficult. We, too, are afraid to look foolish, to 'put ourselves out there' not knowing how we will be received or whether our faith will bear fruit. We are meant to read Jonah's story and chuckle to ourselves, but also to earnestly assess how willing we are to make a meaningful effort on behalf of the God we have come to know.

As I look back on a very full year, I have seen the Spirit moving at Grace. We have accomplished much together in 2023, celebrating our heritage as a congregation. In all that celebrating, though, we have not been resting on previous success. We moved forward, too, discerning a new strategic plan, and figuring out together what God was calling Grace to do in the next several years. The question for us – particularly considering Jonah's story – is, what will we do now that we have greater confidence in what God is calling us to do? Will we pursue greater connection? Will we dedicate ourselves to the needs of campus and community? Will we grow volunteers and nurture leaders within our ranks? These are our priorities, but, without our intentional commitment to them, it is possible that these priorities are little more than words on a page, rather than the shape of our life here at Grace.

Without the effort, the intentional commitment, our life together can be like the unsavory parts of Jonah's story, a people running from the future into which our Lord calls us. Or, on the other hand, we can be like the faithful parts of Jonah's story, learning and re-learning how God's mercies are made new all the time, including for each of us. This endless grace of God is our heritage and our strength as we commit ourselves to the tasks still ahead of us.

Peace in Christ,  
Pr. Gregg

***Pastor's Remarks:***

This past Sunday, our Young Youth and Youth groups learned about affirmations. Affirmations, in this context, are positive statements about oneself, that one says out loud each morning, to start the day with encouragement and intention. Some examples would be: I am capable, I am worthy of love and respect, I can do hard things, I am beautiful, I can learn from my mistakes, My feelings matter, I am funny, My work does not determine my worth.

Studies have shown that participating in a daily affirmation practice can reduce stress and negative self-talk, improve relationships, confidence, and sense of wellbeing, and even contribute to academic achievement. It makes sense – if we're intentionally centering ourselves positively rather than negatively, our outlook shifts, and many things can follow that shift.

Before I introduced this practice to our kids, I read them the children's book "When God Made You" by Matthew Paul Turner. It's a beautifully illustrated book that tells about all the ways God knows you and made you just as wonderfully unique as you are. Again and again, this story reminded our kids that their personalities, their interests, their bodies, their hopes and dreams, were created by God on purpose, with love. We read what God says about us – good things, hopeful things. Things that sound a lot like affirmations.

After we read and talked about what affirmations we might need to hear these days, our kids designed affirmation cards to put on their mirrors, on their desks, or in their wallets, so that every day, they'd be able to say these things out loud and remind themselves of just how wonderful and able they are.

This practice is not just for children. Adults need to hear words of encouragement, too. I wonder if there might be some affirmations you'd like to add to the start of your day. What would affirm who you are and how much you are worth? What would God say about you, a beloved child? Consider writing a few of those down, and then saying them to yourself, out loud, each morning when you get ready. See what difference a reminder of how beautifully and wonderfully made you are can make.

Peace in Christ,  
Pr. Rachel