

Sixteenth Week After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Are You Jealous Because I Am Generous?"  
Jonah 3:10-4:11  
September 23-24, 2023  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This cartoon shows a huge whale on a therapist's couch. The whale is musing, "I'm a man trapped in a whale's body..." The pipe-smoking, bespectacled, balding therapist sitting behind the client inquires, "And how long have you felt this way, Mr. Jonah?"

Our Jewish brothers and sisters hear Jonah read every year at Yom Kippur, so it's interesting timing that this parable shows up in our lectionary the weekend after the Day of Atonement. Being swallowed by a whale is the detail remembered by **most** people who are at **all** familiar with this Bible story. But how many people remember **how** and **why** Jonah got swallowed by the whale?

Jonah is what we call "reluctant". Unlike Isaiah who said, "Here I am, send me!" (Isaiah 6:8) when God called, Jonah's response to God's call was to hop on a boat and head in the opposite direction (Jonah 1:3)! Why? Because his assignment was to go to Nineveh, a city filled with Assyrians whom the children of Israel both feared and hated. To get a flavor of the place God wanted to send Jonah, listen to this description of Nineveh by the prophet Nahum:

*...a city of crime, utterly treacherous, full of violence, where killing never stops.*  
(Nahum 3:1)

Any citizen of Israel with good sense would give that foreign city a wide berth. So when God tells Jonah to go there, Jonah votes with his feet and jumps on the next ship to go far, far away.

The ship safely leaves port but weather quickly becomes a big, big problem. A violent storm arises, with wind so fierce and waves so high even seasoned sailors fear they'll sink. They throw all their cargo overboard, to lighten the load, and finally (to their credit, **reluctantly**), they throw Jonah overboard, too, because he's confessed he's on the lam from God. He volunteered to be thrown into the drink, to calm God's anger and save the ship. But God doesn't want Jonah dead, God needs him alive, so:

*"the LORD provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." (Jonah 1:17b)*

Thankfully Jonah's presence in the fish's belly gives it enough indigestion that it burps him up onto the sand, instead of simply digesting him.

God's right there to welcome Jonah back onto dry land, and to command him **again** to tell the people of Nineveh to repent of their great wickedness, **or else**: or else in 40 days it will be curtains for them and their city. Jonah is quite sure his words will fall on deaf ears and he wants a box seat to witness the city's destruction. Imagine his surprise when the citizens of Nineveh fast, pray, and beg God's forgiveness, **successfully**. **Their** change of heart (which is what repentance is) changes **God's** heart and mind, too, so there'll be no punishment, no apocalyptic ending for a wicked city. Instead, there's a change of heart, an attitude of gratitude, and profound relief.

Sad to say, Jonah isn't just **surprised**, he is **horrified** by this plot twist. He speaks **good** news, but frames it as **bad** news:

*"... I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."*  
(Jonah 4:2c)

His teeth are **so** on edge as he says it, we can almost feel his TMJ kicking in. He's **very** dramatic, a bit of a Sarah Bernhardt, and announces he may as well be **dead**, than live with

this turn of events. And God asks a question that God asks of us, too, when we're pouting at points along the Way: *"Is it right for you to be angry?"* (Jonah 4:4)

Jonah's hoping God has **another** change of heart and will decide to smite the people of Nineveh all over again, so he lays out his blanket on a hillside to have a front row seat. It's hot, and God provides shade from a miraculously quickly-growing bush. Once Jonah really gets comfortable, God assigns a worm to eat the bush and plunge Jonah back into the merciless sun and heat. Big surprise: Jonah complains. He says **again** that he'd be better off dead. (Can you hear the violins playing in the background ☺?) God again counters, *"Is it right for you to be angry...?"* (Jonah 4:9) Cheeky Jonah answers, *"Yes, angry enough to die."* (Jonah 4:10) And in the very last 2 verses in the whole (very short) Book of Jonah, God reflects back Jonah's concern for a plant in which he had nothing invested, and asks the obvious: *"Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons... and also many animals?"* (Jonah 4:11)

*"Is it right for you to be angry...?"* becomes *"Are you jealous because I am generous?"* (Matt. 20:15b) in today's Gospel. In this parable it's the vineyard owner who is speaking, but it's easy to imagine **God** saying this to **us**, as well, when we rail against God's goodness to others. (We never seem to have a problem when God is good to **us**!)

We know all the extenuating circumstances in our own lives that don't exactly make our sinning "okay," but that **should** be mitigating factors, at least in our own minds. Many days we're just not all that interested in walking in others' moccasins, to gain any understanding into **their** failures in love, any empathy for **their** brokenness. Sometimes it kind of boils down to, "I **deserve** this break, but they **don't**." "God's mercy is meant for **me**, but not for **you**." And God, the Source, asks, *"Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what*

*belongs to me?*” (Matt. 20:15a) Like a parent who writes a will and leaves everything to the ASPCA. The children may ask, “What about us?? That’s not fair!” And the parent responds, “My money, my decision.” *“Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?”*

St. Paul puts to bed all of our delusions about being worthy of God’s mercy in his letter to the Romans when he writes, *“We have **all** sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* (Romans 3:23): the people of Nineveh, guilty of all kinds of wickedness, reluctant Jonah, unwilling to address a dangerous audience, more than willing to hightail it out of town to duck the Lord’s command, ready to see Nineveh fry, resentful of God’s loving mercy toward its inhabitants – and last week’s SS officer who repented on his bed of pain in the last days of his life. None of us is worthy of God’s grace. It is unmerited gift, not deserved reward, because *“We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”*

Our God is both merciful **and** just. Luther called punishment for sin “the alien work of God.” He called love and forgiveness “the proper work of God.” Mercy, loving kindness, is definitely the face of God mirrored in our Lord Jesus Christ. We’re glad, grateful, joyful, super-relieved when **we’re** the recipients of that mercy. But sometimes we grumble about who **else** is on the receiving end of holy forgiveness, or who else is blessed far beyond what they “deserve.” And when those moments happen, God asks, *“Is it right for you to be angry...?”* or *“Are you jealous because I am generous?”* And I must honestly respond, “No, it is **not** right that I am angry, and yes, sometimes I **am** jealous because you’re generous, so please, Holy Spirit, create a new heart in me. Grant me grace not to grumble. Fill me with holy humility. Help me to pass along the loving generosity that you lavish upon me.” Amen  
Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

