

“Get over it!”

September 18, 2011

Text: *Jonah 3:10-4:11, Matthew 20:1-16*

I.

God’s grace is always greater than God’s judgment. That’s a mouthful, isn’t it? It’s also GOOD NEWS. Think about it! *God’s grace—which means God’s unconditional acceptance and forgiveness—is always greater than God’s judgment.*

When we think about justice and fairness issues—in education, health care, jobs and unemployment; and the recent report that 46 million Americans are living below the poverty line in our country and that 22% of them are children—as Christians, how can we NOT be concerned.

And we’re reminded that, from God’s point of view, our lives are more than the tough-edged individualism of an Ayn Rand novel. Our lives, as people of faith, are about the power of God’s saving grace to pour over us and empower us to live again, to believe again, to have hope again.

Both of our biblical readings this morning recognize the power and the reach of God’s grace, which believes passionately in new beginnings: that people/ nations can turn their lives around, that they can start over ... with a fresh start, a new beginning.

This affirmation gives hope to the nations in the *Arab spring* upheaval—Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, with Syria knocking at the door. And it gives hope to us—too—in the throes of our economic slumber.

God’s grace believes that it’s never too late to turn to God, to grow and evolve to new understandings, to new ways of seeing the world, new ways of understanding God and God’s purposes.

(This is the last of a three-part sermon series on *getting it* as Christians where, to *get it* means to *GET* what the Christian message is all about.)

The story of **Jonah** is a reminder that, for the God of the Bible, the tilting of God’s purposes is always towards grace and forgiveness and love. To *get it* as Christians, is to grasp this reality and to go with it. In a world where *grace* leads us and guides us—we’re always looking for the best, expecting the best, hoping for the best.

In this world, there’s a vibrating emphasis on people growing and evolving and becoming—everyday—a bigger person, a bigger people.

II.

In the biblical story, God calls Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh to proclaim that great calamities will come upon them if they don't turn from their sinful ways. At first, Jonah protests. He doesn't want to go; in fact, he takes off in the other direction.

Then, as the story relates, some bizarre events begin to happen to him. Eventually, however, God wins out and Jonah finds himself in Nineveh ... walking through the huge city, crying out on God's behalf against the people, telling them that they have forty days to repent and turn to God to avoid destruction.

Amazingly, the king and the people hear God's word against them, renounce their sinful ways and turn to God. As the story is told, this is a stunning turn around. No one seems to expect this.

There are three things to note here:

1. First, that the people of Nineveh have responded so favorably and repentantly to Jonah's word of warning to them. That's certainly GOOD NEWS.
2. Secondly, that God, seeing them turn from their evil ways, changes God's mind and elects NOT bring calamity upon them. More GOOD NEWS.
3. And, thirdly, the disappointing news, that Jonah—seeing all of this happen—is, now, displeased and angered that God has changed God's mind and that the destruction of Nineveh has been avoided.

III.

Regrettably, Jonah's reaction to this is small. He's upset. He pouts. He becomes angry at God for being a God of such forgiveness and grace. We're kind of caught off guard by his reaction.

And rather than celebrate and give thanks to God for a successful intervention, what does Jonah do? He goes out to the edge of town where, in a foul mood, he sits down and waits to see what will become of the city.

Meanwhile, to teach Jonah a lesson, God appoints a bush to grow, rising up over Jonah's head to give him shade in the heat. Jonah is pleased with the bush. However, the next day, God appoints a worm to attack the bush so that it withers and dies. With this, Jonah is even more furious.

Then God says to Jonah: *Jonah, what's up with you? You're concerned about a bush, which you didn't help with in any way? Shouldn't I—the God of all creation—be more concerned about Nineveh, a great city of more than 120,000 people?*

IV.

What's going on with Jonah? Why is he pouting and all upset by God's magnanimous act of grace for the thousands of people in Nineveh?

Is it because he didn't *get his way*? There are people like that, aren't there? No matter the virtue of the action or the happening, if they don't get their way ... if it's not what they wanted, they're upset and they pout and, sometimes, they hold on to it.

Why is Jonah so invested in witnessing Nineveh's destruction? What God wants to say to Jonah is:

GET OVER IT! It's not about you. It's about God and the power of God's grace to warm people's hearts and change their lives.

Why wouldn't Jonah want to see the people of Nineveh saved? Why wouldn't he wish for their total salvation, rather than their destruction? And then, once God has opted NOT to act against Nineveh, why doesn't **Jonah** accept the news with a gracious and agreeable spirit?

The problem with Jonah is that he's, apparently, not a BIG person. He's a small person. He's not thinking about the BIG PICTURE and what's good for the larger community. He's lost in his own little, self-contained world. How sad!

V.

To *get it* as Christians, friends, is to BE BIG ... and to see the BIG PICTURE; and not just to see it, but to care about the discrepancies and injustices that are revealed.

- To care that there are 46 million people in our country living below the poverty line.
- To care that we have massive problems across our nation with education, where our international ranking has perilously plummeted in recent decades.
- It's to care about the widening gap between the rich and the poor which is always a telling sign of the character of any nation.

To *get it* as Christians is to understand, with compassionate hearts, God's preferential option for the poor ... for the lost ... for the least of these ... for the ones, even, who show up late, perhaps ... the ones who, for whatever reasons, are always on the outside looking in. In other words, God is forever reaching out to the most vulnerable among us.

VI.

God's grace has its own agenda. It has its own energy, its own vision, its own purpose. We see this richly revealed in **Matthew's** instructive parable of *The Workers in the Vineyard*.

One of the teachings of this parable, like the story of Jonah, is to challenge us to be a bigger person. Be BIG! Don't be small. Which means, don't over react to things before you see the BIG PICTURE; before you have the whole story, before you've been able to make a fair and just assessment of what it's all about.

Again, so often in life, context is everything.

Our biblical stories this morning are more about grace than justice. That doesn't mean that justice isn't important to God. It means that before God's justice can stand us up and lift our spirit, we need to experience God's grace.

We need to know that our lives matter ... and that in those parts of our lives where we need to start over—where we need a fresh beginning—that we can do just that. That we don't have to beat ourselves up with guilt and regret and low self-esteem just waiting and hoping that one day, God's justice will rescue us.

Justice comes ... after the grace.

In the parable, workers are hired to work in a vineyard throughout the day, from 9:00 a.m. until right before the day's end at 5:00 p.m. The problem is, when it comes time to be paid, they're all paid the same thing, a day's wage. Understandably, there's grumbling from those who, even though they were paid what was promised them, worked longer hours in the hot sun.

- But again, the parable is not about fairness. It's about grace and the immeasurable generosity of God's spirit.
- The early workers have a point. But the larger point is that God's grace is so loving and compassionate that it welcomes everyone, even the late-comers.

What the parable asks of us is that we be less concerned about getting our personal fair share of the goods of this life and more concerned about sharing the love, and having compassion for those for whom life is hard, for whom it's a daily struggle ... i.e., for those who have more to overcome.

VII.

In other words: be a BIG person, not a small person. Which means: if you're going to err, err on the side of being welcoming and accepting. Err on the side of compassion and forgiveness.

1. Give people more breathing room, not less; more wiggle room, not less.

2. Be a vehicle of God's grace, a channel of God's mercy.
3. Don't react too soon with a harsh word or a judgmental demeanor.
4. Look always for the good, lifting up the good in one another.

As human beings, we all have times in our lives, moments in our lives, when we need more grace than usual to make it through. In this spirit, let's be BIG ... and have a BIG spirit, that God's grace might nudge us more towards God's ways.

For it is then that we approach what Paul calls us to in Philippians ...

- *to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ ...*
- *striving side by side with ONE mind ... that God's salvation might come to the ends of the earth.*

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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