



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

DANCING IN THE RHYTHM OF GRACE

January 25, 2015

Judeo-Christian

Jonah 3.10 – 4.5

When God saw that the people of Nineveh turned from their evil ways, God changed her mind about the calamity that she had said she would bring upon them; and she did not do it. But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the Lord said, “Is it right for you to be angry?” Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, under the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

Islam

Qur’an 2.49-53

In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful:

Remember how We delivered you from Pharaoh’s people, who had oppressed you cruelly, slaying your sons. Surely that was a great trial by your Lord. We parted the sea for you and, taking you to safety, drowned Pharaoh’s men before your very eyes. We made a tryst with Moses for the fortieth night, and in his absence you took up the worship of other gods and thus committed evil. Yet after that We pardoned you, so that you might give thanks.

During his reign as tsar, Peter the Great was known for the great modernization he brought to Russia, taking it out of the middle ages into the modern world of the 17th century. Along the way, Peter was also very brutal, calling for torture as most other rulers did in order to extract information about uprisings. At one particularly gruesome scene, when the Streltsy were enduring their torture without giving Peter the information he sought, he decided to try a different approach. Taking one of the rebels aside, he talked to him kindly, as a human being, promising him rewards and position in the court if he would confess and volunteer the information Peter sought. The rebel was so taken aback by this generosity and kindness he willingly confessed, offered the information and was forgiven by the tsar who kept his promise to reward him. It was a moment of insight for Peter and certainly a moment of unexpected grace for the rebel. He had been trained to withstand the harshest of tortures but he had not been trained to endure kindness.

Grace is often more difficult to comprehend—and accept—than punishment and retribution because it is counter intuitive; we have been taught to believe that force makes might. When we operate out of a system of retaliation, forgiveness undermines the foundation of strength from which one functions.

We have before us today the parable of Jonah, a story about a proud and haughty man, an enormous and hospitable fish, and the grace of God. As the story goes, Jonah had been invited by God to a forgiveness party, in Nineveh, the Sin City of his day. Jonah declined the invitation, not because he didn't want to go to that wicked city but because, we find out later, he knew God loved these people that Jonah hated. Jonah wanted God to hate the people that he, Jonah, hated. He boarded a boat going the opposite direction. That the ship was nearly torn apart by a storm which forced the sailors, to keep life and limb together, to throw overboard everything except themselves to keep it afloat, was lost on Jonah, who was sound asleep in First Class. When jarred out of his slumber by the sailors who asked everyone on board to pray to their god for salvation from a watery grave, Jonah knew the storm was on his account, so volunteered to be cast overboard. Jonah's God was appeased, the storm stopped, and the sailors were impressed, not to say immensely thankful, providing for them a new God to worship.

While the sailors are celebrating the calm sea, Jonah is swallowed by a large fish where he takes up residence for three days and nights, contemplating his fate. As parables are by definition stories by which we learn life's lessons, there is a lesson to be learned for Jonah. Once regurgitated on dry land, he decides to go to Nineveh.

When he arrives at that Wicked City, undoubtedly smelling like fish innards, he walks the length and the breadth of the city threatening God's punishment if the inhabitants don't turn from their wicked ways. Much to Jonah's dismay, and to God's delight, the people indeed repent, in spades, and receive God's gracious mercy and undying love. One would think Jonah would be pleased with his success, but he isn't; he is angrier now than when he began, railing against God for letting these people off the hook so easily. Jonah's self-righteousness shines against the backdrop of his own wicked hatred as he shakes his fist at a loving and gracious God who is merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, ready always to transform human unkindness by divine kindness. Poor Jonah.

In the stage play *Les Miserables*, an ex-convict, released from prison, takes advantage of a local bishop who has shown him kindness, by stealing the silver plate on which he has been fed. When arrested for the theft, he is let off the hook by the testimony of the bishop who says that he gave the plate as a gift. This unexpected deliverance from a dreaded return to prison so surprises the ex-convict that he takes to heart the bishop's admonition to change his ways. The story continues some years later when the ex-convict, now a respectable citizen and mayor, is pursued by a former prison guard who is now a prominent Police Inspector. In a turn of events, it is the Inspector who finds himself in a situation where the ex-convict-turned-respectable-mayor has a chance to kill him. The ex-convict mayor, however, spares the life of the Inspector, an act of grace that stupefies the Inspector who cannot conceive of loving, generous behavior so unexpected, so unexplainable. As the two meet toward the end of the play, the Inspector once again has the upper hand, but lets the ex-convict, whom he has pursued for many years, go free. Wracked with doubt and confusion in which his whole belief system crumbles because the ex-convict did not act as he was supposed to, the Inspector, unable to deal with his inner turmoil, jumps into the river and sinks beneath its dark waters.

It is better that I should die, said Jonah, than try to accept this kind of love, this kind of forgiveness, this kind of generosity. It is so unfair from Jonah's perspective he'd rather give up his life than give up his self-righteousness.

The problem with God's grace is that we like it when it favors us but resent it when it favors someone we think deserves punishment. Grace is unacceptable to those whose selfish ambitions defy the kind of world God desires, a world where love is extravagant and forgiveness wins the day. Jesus told a parable about a man who was forgiven a million dollars of debt by his creditor but then had another man arrested who owed him five dollars. It is a story of unacceptable grace by a man who didn't quite get the joke of his own inconsistent behavior. Grace is unacceptable for the most part to those who are hardened by legalities and harsh boundaries, who want justification for every action, who keep track of numbers and scores. Law engenders rigidity and punishment; grace invites transformation and harmony. We don't like it when someone gets less than what we think they deserve. We don't like it when someone else gets something we think we deserve better. All too often, religion makes us judgmental toward those different from ourselves rather than evoking compassion for their God-like goodness.

A song made popular by Lee Ann Womack, mixing pop music with traditional country style, offers a poetic interpretation of this story, inviting us to enter the fray more creatively, more faithfully than did dear ole Jonah.

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder;
you get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger
May you never take one single breath for granted;
God forbid love ever leave you empty handed.
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean,
Whenever one door closes I hope one more opens,
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance,
and when you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance. I hope you dance.

I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance,
never settle for the path of least resistance.
Livin' might mean takin' chances, but they're worth takin'
Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth making'
Don't let some hell-bent heart leave you bitter;
when you come close to sellin' out, reconsider
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance. I hope you'll dance.

Dancing to the rhythm of grace is far more life-giving and love-engendering than sitting out and pouting. Much joy is sacrificed when we take the path of least resistance. Much fulfillment eludes us when we choose to sit out the invitation to dance. Jonah didn't want to dance with God; he runs the other way when invited to the dance floor of grace. But when the Ninevites accept God as dance partner, jealous Jonah sits it out, all by himself, in the shadow of his own self-pity.

A friend of mine received a card with the following sentiment.

I still believe that generosity is its own reward, that kindness will prevail, that might does not make right, that a soft answer turns away wrath. I still believe that there is power in gentleness, that there is more to us than flesh and bone, that life will bring more happiness if lived for peace and not possessions. I still believe people of gentleness and faith can change the world, one unseen, unsung, unrewarded kindness at a time and nothing in this world can

make me stop believing this. By all the good deeds and gracious living that you do, I thank you for proving me right.

Hear today the invitation to dance to the rhythm of God's grace. When you get the choice to sit it out or dance, I hope you dance. I hope you dance. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, high above our imaginations and whose loving judgments are beyond our human comprehension, we seek you in this sanctuary so that we might be saved from ourselves. Small creatures are we, too much absorbed by trivial busyness and our own selfish pursuits, obsessed with temporal details at the expense of eternal values. Carry us out of ourselves into interests larger than our own concerns. Let saints and scientists, poets and composers speak to us of the possibilities of broader horizons.

Save us from the Jonah complex of self-pity, wasting energy and breath complaining about the injustices done to us; cause us to realize that life is far richer and more pleasant by giving thanks for all that we have been privileged to enjoy. Give us deep resources of interior strength that we may face life with adequacy; that we may rise above the difficulties that confront us with victories of grace in spite of them; that life may grow strong from within so that we may be triumphant without; that we may rejoice and be glad in the graciousness of a God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Save us from our narrow interests and cares. Help us live out our lives in others' lives, knowing that there is no good that comes to each that should not come to all and no good that may come to all that should not be the care of each. When we pray, let us remember that we begin with OUR: our father, our mother who art in heaven; forgive us our sins, our trespasses, give us our daily bread. Cast down all prejudice across all barriers that ancient days have built of race, creed, class, nation, religion and lifestyle that love may flow in the water of your grace.

We offer prayers of hope for those named and those unnamed who are in hospital, or homebound, or ill; those facing death; those grieving the death of loved ones; those anxious about tomorrow and those having to live with the consequences of the past; those who are lonely and those who are too busy for time alone. Give to each and all what is needed to grace their lives with peace and joy.

Throw the warm cloak of your greatness around us and be the unseen strength that inspires us to do great things for those around us. We ask it in the spirit of the Christ, Amen.