

Third Sunday after Epiphany, B
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
I Corinthians 7:29-31
Mark 1:14-20

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Humor has healing power. Groucho Marx once said, “A clown is like aspirin, only he works twice as fast.” When we laugh, it produces endorphins that lower our sensitivity to pain and help us relax. When we find something funny, it actually changes our brain’s chemistry and feeds the brain’s pleasure center with dopamine.
(www.laughterremedy.com)

And while humor literally changes our brain, it also has the power to change our minds—open them up to new possibilities. When we’re overly serious we can get stuck in one point of view, locked in by stress and anxiety. But when we lighten up and laugh, we enter a more playful state of reflection. We’re able to take a step back from our circumstances, observe things from a distance, and get some new perspective. (*This Emotional Life: Humor*, www.pbs.org)

The book of Jonah is a great case in point. Most people don’t expect the Bible to be funny, but I dare you to read this little book and not crack a smile. In fact, if you *don’t* laugh, you’ve missed the point.

The book of Jonah could be summarized by a cartoon I saw. It shows a huge whale spitting a man out onto a beach. The title is “Don’t be Whale Vomit—Obey Today!”

Jonah himself is a crazy caricature of what a prophet should be, and the book is a preposterous, madcap story of his adventures in not serving God. God commands Jonah to preach to the evil city of Nineveh, to warn them of God’s judgment and get them to repent. But Jonah does exactly the opposite. Instead of going east to Nineveh, he jumps on a boat heading directly west. Why? At this point we don’t know. But God has something different in mind. God sends a storm to rock the boat Jonah is riding on, and when the sailors find out the storm is Jonah’s fault, they throw him overboard – at which point he is swallowed by an enormous fish. (I guess you could take this story seriously, but really.)

So Jonah spends three days and three nights in a divine time-out, sitting in the belly of a fish. You could say he’s “digesting” everything that’s happened. When his time-out is done, the fish spews Jonah out on the beach. And God says again: Jonah, do your job.

This time Jonah does go to Nineveh, and he does warn them. But he gives the wimpiest, most half-hearted prophecy ever recorded: “In 40 days God will destroy you.” That’s all Jonah says, but what happens? The whole wicked city repents! In fact they over-repent. They dress all the people in sackcloth (to show they are sorry) – and they even dress the animals in sackcloth. That’s too much. Not even the Israelites would go to that extreme of piety. The king of Nineveh declares a fast for everyone (including the animals) and he turns immediately from his evil ways to worship Israel’s God.

Wow! This is fantastic! Jonah should have been delighted. He’s the most successful prophet in the whole Bible. In fact, he’s the *only* successful prophet in the whole Bible. Jonah is headed for the evangelism hall of fame!

But is Jonah happy? No, he is furious. Jonah fumes. Jonah sulks. And-- this is the funniest part of the whole book-- Jonah sits under a fig tree and whines: I knew it, God! I just knew you’d forgive them! I knew you were “*a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing.*” ...Well of course that’s who God is, what did Jonah expect?

But now we see that Jonah never wanted those people of Nineveh to be forgiven. They didn’t deserve it. He wanted no part in sharing God’s mercy with those wicked foreigners. In fact, Jonah went to the ends of the earth to avoid bringing God’s mercy and forgiveness to them.

But—here’s the punch line—it turns out *there was no way Jonah could prevent God from being God*. No way he could keep God’s favor just to himself and his own people. God was determined to turn those Ninevites around, by hook or by crook. And God was set on roping Jonah into being God’s agent for mission, regardless of Jonah’s own wishes.

See, it turns out, God really means this forgiveness thing. God’s mercy is for everyone – and that means everyone. No place or people or nation is beyond the reach of God’s love. And if God’s people are going to be true to God’s vision, they have to extend God’s love to everyone – not keep it to themselves, or keep themselves separate from others they think are less deserving. The book of Jonah was written to teach this message to ancient Israel, and to us. God’s people are meant to be a light to ALL the nations – a light to ALL people, no exceptions. To make this happen, God is going to just keep on stretching our comfort zones, for the sake of God’s outreaching love.

Jonah never did get over his snit. He never did say yes to God's all-embracing mercy. And that open ending means it's up to people who read the Bible story to write our own conclusions, in our own lives, as we make our own choices about being God's light to all people.

Whether in ancient times or today, this involves soul-searching. Because, though Jonah is one of the funniest books in the Bible, it deals with some of the most serious themes we can imagine.

The city of Nineveh that Jonah hated so much, was actually hated by the whole ancient world -- for good reason. Nineveh was capitol of the Assyrian Empire, a brutal military power. Even today you can see stone carvings of when Assyrian armies overran a town in ancient Israel. They show soldiers viciously torturing their captives, people's bodies stretched out flat on the ground, being flayed with whips. (see: Lachish reliefs) Nineveh inflicted cruelty beyond cruelty on Jonah's own people and many others. To imagine God loving those brutal killers? It was offensive at the most visceral level.

In fact, what God was calling Jonah to do was exactly what Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount, the most demanding commandment of all: "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" (Mt 5:44) Through the story of Jonah, God was calling all Israelites to face up to their deepest hatreds and reach beyond them -- for the sake of being God's light to ALL the nations of the world.

Now, when it comes to reaching beyond hatred, it turns out it's not that big a stretch between ancient Israel and our United States. We know all about hating and despising. For so long now our life as a nation has been poisoned by polarization and lies. Divisions and grievances have been stoked by leaders for their own advantage. On both left and right there has been a tendency, even eagerness, to view the other side as the enemy, opponents beyond reason, beyond hope, beyond understanding or compassion. This is the kind of attitude both Jonah and Jesus intend to undo.

I've been struck by how emotionally people have responded to the Presidential Inauguration this week. I've heard and read people from across the political and religious spectrum who reported watching the ceremony with a profound sense of relief. People said they were surprised to feel tears streaming down their faces. They were so thankful for a peaceful day, an orderly transition, so grateful to hear words of unity and healing spoken. It's what we want so deeply—healing.

Yet we can't deny that the way ahead looks enormously challenging. Two weeks ago were riots and deaths in the Capitol. In two more weeks an impeachment trial will take place there. There are wounds and resentments aplenty, so that the thought of healing and unity seems, at times, viscerally impossible.

But here is the good news, straight from Jonah: *God doesn't ever give up on us. Any of us.* God does not give up on people who are angry and divided and unrepentant. God does not even give up on people who are cruel and death-dealing. God does not give up on a nation that is built on the principle of all people created equal and struggles to live up to that ideal. God does not give up God-lovers and Jesus-followers like us who struggle to live up to our own ideals.

God didn't give up on Jonah, God didn't give up on Nineveh, God doesn't give up on us. And we shouldn't give up either.

At times we might find ourselves sulking under that fig tree with Jonah, consumed with resentment, vowing we will never wish anything good for those so-and-so's on the other side. Yet could it be possible for us to envision God – maybe not laughing at our short-sightedness – but perhaps God smiling warmly with a greater, divine wisdom that knows how deeply we all need each other to survive in this nation and on this planet. Knows how precious and valued each person truly is. God is faithful to humankind. God is gracious to people who need relationship – with God, and with one another. Because God is *gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.* And this is the God we follow.

God has something bigger and better in mind for all of us. God has in mind that faithful people would be light for the world. That we speak truth and live with courage. That we never give up, never lose hope, never stop doing what we can to bring justice to all people, to live the way of generosity and compassion and forgiveness and love, following Jesus. How this gets lived out politically and personally, in nations and cities and individual lives, is part of our life-long challenge, supported by God's Spirit.

I'm wondering what "love your enemies" can mean today. I'm wondering what "God loves your enemies" can mean today. And what all this means for our nation, for our city, and for us. There are no easy answers, no simple solutions, but we can keep on making a new start.

Thanks be to God. Amen.