

There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

Jonah 3:10-4:11

New Testament: Matthew 20:1-16

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David Allen Farmer was a minister who at one time served a church in New Orleans, many years ago. During his pastorate there, a major evangelical denomination decided to hold its annual convention in the Crescent City. As a way of taking advantage of the huge numbers of people who would be converging on New Orleans for the business meetings of the convention, the denominational leadership decided to invite people to arrive a couple of days early, so they could use their enormous numeric influence to save the hell-bound souls of the wicked New Orleanians. It was a great evangelistic opportunity they couldn't pass up.

Pastor Farmer decided that he would head down to Bourbon Street on one of those evenings when the evangelists were working the streets. A young man came up and pushed an evangelistic tract into Farmer's face. "What's this?" Farmer asked.

"It's a publication about God," said the young man.

"Well, what does it say about God?" pressed Farmer.

"I'm not sure," said the young man.

"You haven't read it?"

"No."

"I'm sure it must tell me something about God's love, don't you think?" suggested Farmer.

"I doubt it," said the young evangelist. "We want to keep you people from going to hell, so this pamphlet probably tells you about burning in eternity and stuff."

"Let me be clear on this," said Farmer. "You care about my eternal destiny, yet you don't even know my name or what the tract says?"

"Look, mister, I have to pass out all these tracts before I can meet my friends for Cajun food. You'd better get saved, or you're going to hell; that's all."

"Thank you for your concern," said Farmer as he walked away. ¹

"You'd better get saved, or you're going to hell."

That's a message that is not much different than the message that Jonah had delivered to the people of Nineveh: "Forty more days, and Nineveh will be overturned," he proclaimed throughout the city.² In the Hebrew language, it is a five-word sermon that Jonah preached. Yet it was the word of God, and as such it penetrated the hearts of the Ninevites, who repented of their evil ways and turned to God. Thus begins this morning's scripture lesson: "When God saw what [the Ninevites] did, how they turned from their

evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”³

You know the story of Jonah. Jonah is the reluctant prophet. God called Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because of its great wickedness. Nineveh in modern times would be a combination of the worst of Nazi Germany, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Las Vegas, and the red light district of Amsterdam, all put together in one violent, evil, immoral slime pit. So it’s no wonder that when God commanded Jonah to preach against that city, Jonah quickly ran... in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship that was headed toward the Spanish port of Tarshish.

While he was on the ship, a great storm arose and threatened to break the ship apart. At some point, Jonah realized that God had sent the storm as judgment against him for running away, and so he urged the crew to throw him overboard in order to spare the ship further judgment.

Before Jonah sank to the bottom of the sea, a giant fish swallowed him. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, long enough for him to think about what he had done, long enough for him to compose a song to God that is recorded in chapter 2.

Anyway, the fish got sick of Jonah... literally. The fish vomited Jonah onto dry land. God then commanded Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh. This time, Jonah decided to obey. So he went, and he preached: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” Or, to put it in contemporary context, “You’d better get saved, or you’re going to hell.”

Well, as I mentioned a moment ago, the Ninevites repented, and God spared the great city. You would think that Jonah would be satisfied with a job well done. Some evangelists would sacrifice their firstborn to have that many people repent and turn to God.

But instead of happiness at the result of his preaching, Jonah got angry with God. And he went off on the hillside and he sat down and he sulked. And at first God gave Jonah a plant that offered him some shade to protect him from the sun. Then God took the plant away, so that Jonah was faint from the heat.

Then God and Jonah had a heart-to-heart talk.

In this final chapter, we are given a message about God’s grace, and then we are given a choice: will we resent God’s grace when it extends to people whom we despise or think unworthy, or will we appreciate God’s grace for what it is--unmerited, unconditional love?

When he sees how God has spared the Ninevites, Jonah reacts with these words: “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”⁴ It is a beautiful description of the character of God. It is a beautiful description of the way God reacts to our world. The words are beautiful, but from Jonah’s mouth they are spoken with anger and acrimony. You see, Jonah can’t stand the thought that God’s grace and compassion would extend even to the Ninevites. Jonah can’t stand the thought that God’s forbearance and abundance of love would apply to that evil city.

Jonah is very much like the envious workers from this morning’s gospel lesson. Jonah believes that somehow he is more deserving of God’s generosity and grace, whereas the others aren’t. Jonah resents a generosity that defies reason and common sense.

And in Jonah's anger and resentment, there is a challenge to every one of us: are there people you would rather consign to hell than consider that perhaps God might still reach out to them? How big is God's grace--big enough just for people like us, who are already pretty decent in the first place, or even bigger than most of us would like to admit?

You see, there is a wideness in God's mercy, just like we sang a few moments ago. There is a kindness in God's justice. There is welcome for the sinner. There is mercy with the Savior. And that is incredible news! What a wondrous God we worship, who accepts us not because somehow we have earned our way into his presence, but because he loves us with an everlasting love that is wider and deeper and greater than any of us can imagine. There is a wideness in God's mercy; do you think it's wide enough to embrace people you despise?

Jonah had forgotten one thing. He had forgotten that the people of Israel had done nothing to become God's special called people. He had forgotten that before God called Abraham, everyone was like the Ninevites--following other gods, wandering aimlessly, at odds with one another, doing whatever they pleased. Jonah forgot that at one time we were all Ninevites. Jonah forgot that he, too, was an unworthy recipient of the grace and compassion and forbearance and steadfast love of God. Jonah had forgotten that, but by the grace of God, he would still be like a Ninevite.

There was a large affluent church that had for years supported some inner-city ministry among the poor. Every year on the first Sunday of January it was the custom of the large church to host persons from the inner-city ministry for communion. On one such occasion, as the people came to the communion railing to receive communion, it just happened that a former burglar kneeled before the railing next to the judge who had sent the burglar to jail seven years before. While in prison, the burglar had converted to Christianity and was now trying to turn his life around. As they knelt together, though, neither the former convict nor the judge seemed to recognize the other.

After the service, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to the pastor, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?"

The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't know that you noticed." The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, and then the judge said, "What a miracle of grace." The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes, what marvelous miracle of grace."

Then the judge said "But to whom do you refer?"

And the pastor said, "Why, to the conversion of that convict."

The judge said, "But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself."

The pastor replied in surprise, "You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand."

The judge replied, "It did not cost that burglar much to get converted when he came out of jail. He had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he heard of the mercy and compassion of God, he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him.... But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take communion and so on. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner

on level with that burglar. It took much more grace to forgive me for all my pride and self deception, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than that convict that I sent to prison.”

Maybe the judge has the wideness of God’s mercy in the right perspective. It takes very little to imagine God’s mercy to be wide enough for the reprobates, for the evil ones, for the immoral ones in our world. After all, they’re the ones who really need God’s mercy if they’re going to have any chance at redemption.

Maybe the real question is, Is God’s mercy wide enough for the decent people of this world, the people who are basically good, who on any given day follow the rules and live mostly right?

Maybe the real question is, Is God’s mercy wide enough for you and me?

¹ David Allen Farmer, “Jonah 3-4”, Interpretation, January 2000, pp. 63-64.

² Jonah 3:4

³ Jonah 3:10

⁴ Jonah 4:2