

September 24, 2017

The Gracious Hand of God

PRAYER

May the words of mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. AMEN.

SERMON

I have to admit I really like the book of Jonah. I like it because it shows true humanity. And it shows the grace of God. Now if you were to go and ask somebody about the book of Jonah or what they knew about the prophet Jonah, you'd get a pretty standard answer especially if you asked a child. Well he's the guy who ended up in the belly of the fish or whale or whatever it was. And they would be right. That is a key part of that prophet message. But if you ask him how many end up there? Most people don't know. Do you? (Congregation: "Yes.") Who, who said this? Well you do know. If you were here three..." "Yeah, Okay Pastor V knows. It was a lot safer at 8:00, okay. Well you were at the 8:00 service, well then you come up and preach the sermon." (Laughter)

See Jonah was a prophet of God and God called upon him. Now a prophet is someone that speaks God's word. They don't predict the future, they speak God's word to the people to whom God sends them. And God has seen Nineveh and it is a city that has become corrupted, evil. They're not following God. God is not happy with that. God is not pleased with that. And so, God tells Noah, uh Jonah sorry, go to Nineveh. (Baby babbling) Exactly. Go to Nineveh and tell the people that I am unhappy that they are not following my word and that if that doesn't change then they will be destroyed.

And we often think of prophets that when God speaks to them they say, "Of course, you send me I'm going." Not so much with Jonah. Jonah says, "I don't want to go to Nineveh and I'll tell you why. You're going to send me there with your word about repentance and then turning away from their evil. And they might just hear that message and do what you have asked them to do. And if they do that, you God, are going to forgive them. And I don't think they should be forgiven. They're bad people. They've done bad things. They ought to be punished."

And so rather than get on the road to Nineveh, he gets on a boat the other way. And the reason he ends up in the sea is because a great storm comes up and the crew is worried about the ship being sunk. And Jonah finally goes and he says to the crew he says, "The reason that the sea is the way it is is that God is unhappy with me because I am running away from what God wants me to do rather than following God. And if you throw me into the sea, the sea will calm down. God will calm the sea down." And so, the crew said, "You got it."

Now Jonah could have volunteered to jump, but he didn't. He got thrown into the sea, he was in the fish, he repents. He finds out what it is to be on the wrong side of God. To repent and be forgiven. The fish spews him out onto dry land. And he makes his way to Nineveh. And that's where we get the story that was read this morning.

He goes to Ninevah. He preaches the word of God. Tells them that God is unhappy with them. That they are an evil and corrupt people. And they need to repent and turn away from that. And live according to the will and word of God. And what do they do. Exactly what Jonah was afraid they were going to do. They repent.

"You're right, you're right. We are going to turn around. We are not going to live that way anymore. And we are going to ask for the Lord's forgiveness." And what does God do, he forgives them. And one would think that after going through being in the belly of the fish and repenting himself and being forgiven. And giving the opportunity to fulfill his task that Jonah would understand that. Not so much.

He's angry. I knew this was going to happen. I knew you were going to do this because I know you God. I knew you were going to forgive them and I think they ought to be punished. So, I'm going to go up on the hill so I can overlook the city and see if maybe you'll change your mind and give them the punishment they most justly deserve. And I'm going to be angry until you do. He's a pouty little child. Just like most of us when we don't get our way. When we think God is being too lenient on some of these people.

And of course, we have the rest of the story where, you know, Jonah is in the heat and he's got a booth and God tries to teach him one more time. Makes the bush come up, shake the booth so he's not quite so hot. He's real happy with that, happy with the bush. Then God sends the worm, kills the bush. Bush dies, no

shade, it's hot out. He's not happy. Do you do well to be angry at the bush? Well yes, angry enough to die. (Baby babbling) Oh I'm sorry. (Laughter) That was Jonah not me.

And again, God tries to explain to him that it's better to be forgiven. We have a whole city worth of people here. To forgive is what God is about. To allow people that opportunity to come to know God better. And to come to know God better. And to live according to God's will.

It reminds me that and the parable in the Gospel this morning, reminds me of the verse from Isaiah. You know my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways, says the Lord. A reminder that we are not supposed to recreate God in our image but to live out being created in God's image. That forgiveness, that love, that giving, that generosity is part of who God is calling us to be. Not for us to deny God to do that for others.

And that's what the parable that Jesus told the people was really about. The parables of Jesus are centered around the Kingdom of God that Jesus has brought the message to the world. This is the kingdom of God and you're invited. But to accept the invitation means that this is the way that you begin to live your life. So, the kingdom of God is like this, he tells the parable of the landowner and the laborers in sending them out throughout the day. And then paying them in reverse order. And the message is to help us to know more about who God is.

See in the time that Jesus was telling the story it was all about law. And the Pharisees helped sway. It was about following the law the way they said it should be followed. And the condemnation that would come not only if the law was not only not followed but not followed the way they said it should be. And so, he's telling this parable about the Kingdom of Heaven. So that they can understand more about God and more about what they are being invited to and called to.

The first part is about God. Who is God? He's not just a god of laws where everything has to be just this way. That God is watching over and if you happened to step outside the line of the law then you're condemned. This is about God who is generous. This is about a God who gives opportunity after opportunity to come and be a part of the Kingdom of God. And if you don't hear the message the first time and if you don't happen to be in the right place at the right time. Well then, he's going to come back again and invite you.

And it doesn't matter when you come, when you accept that invitation you will receive that very same thing that others receive. And the difference is that those who came first have the opportunity to live out that life longer. To know God better for a longer period of time. To come to know and understand what it is to be a part of the kingdom of God. To know the generosity of God. To know the abundance of God's blessings. To be able to see one another not to compare and say, "Well they don't deserve what I get because I've been a part of this thing called the church so much longer."

It's about rejoicing that God is so abundant and so generous that everybody gets the same reward. Everybody gets to come to this fullness of God's kingdom. We all ought to be rejoicing about that. We ought not withhold that from those who came late. It makes sense. My thoughts are not your thoughts. I'm not going to treat people the way that you think they ought to be treated. I'm not going to withhold forgiveness because you think they ought to be punished. I'm not going to give them less of a reward because they didn't come earlier to the Kingdom.

Maybe they didn't hear the call. Maybe they weren't at the right place at the right time. But as long as they come. We could all rejoice together. That's the God we worship. That's the God who speaks to us. That is the God who tries to fill our hearts with love, care, compassion, mercy, justice. So that we can be together in God's kingdom and rejoice with one another in God's kingdom.

Over and over again, we hear about how we fail to live into being created in the image of God. But we also hear over and over again the forgiveness and God's attempts to call us and invite us to give us a gift. Not that we need to change who we are in order to receive that gift. But once we have received the gift to change who we are. To become more like the image of God in which we were created. To be, to reflect more what Jesus showed life in relationship with God, humanity's relationship with God is really all about.

May we accept the invitation. Accept that gift. Make it a part of who we are so that we can see God for who God is. One who is generous with blessings. One who loves and wants to be loved in return. To see one another not as competitors for a limited amount of resources but brothers and sisters who receive all that we are and all that we will ever be from the gracious hand of God.