



“Going Deep: Expansive Grace”

Jonah 4:1-11

August 30, 2020

This is the word of the Lord. And that’s the end of the Book of Jonah. Sure doesn’t sound like it, right? The story concludes with a question that Jonah never gets to answer, and leaves us, the reader, with more questions than answers. What comes next? How does the prophet respond to this discrepancy between his deep concern over the fate of a fast-growing shrub and his disregard for the whole population of the city of Nineveh? Does Jonah repent? Does he see the light? It’s an unsatisfying conclusion for those of us who like tidy endings in which all the strings are pulled together and the moral of the story is plainly stated. It reads more like an open-ended parable than a simple morality play. And perhaps that is precisely the point.

A quick recap of where we’ve been with Jonah through the month of August. This Hebrew minding his own business receives the word of the Lord as a deeply personal call—*Go at once to Nineveh*. Resistant from the start, Jonah runs for a ship headed the opposite direction. But God is neither deterred nor subtle, summoning both storm and sea creature to get Jonah back to square one. The word of God comes to him a second time and Jonah does only what he is told and nothing more, warning the Ninevites of God’s judgment. But, as Jonah predicted, the whole city repents. As Jonah feared, God chooses grace over condemnation, and Nineveh is spared. Exasperated by this God of steadfast love, Jonah builds himself a shed in which to sulk over this injustice.

Jonah is angry. Irate. Furious. Resentful. Livid. You get the point. And, in chapter four he is also hot, roasting in the Mesopotamian sun. In this final scene of the story, God giveth and God taketh away a shade bush under which Jonah has found some small degree of comfort. And, when the bush withers, Jonah is again angry. Irate. Furious. You get the point.

Anger is Jonah’s default mode, it seems to me. I don’t mean to suggest that he was without his reasons. His life was interrupted by an inconvenient divine call to travel to enemy land. His alternate plan overthrown in the worst way, his body thrown to the sea. The people who had destroyed his homeland given another chance to do the right thing; they were offered the same grace that ought to be reserved for Jonah and his people. Jonah could find reasons for anger.

And so, when God asks Jonah (twice) whether it is right for him to be angry, Jonah’s self-righteous indignation gives him the confidence to answer—yes. *Of course, it is right for me to be angry! What is not right is what has been happening to me since chapter one.* Jonah is angry enough to die.

Now, I’m not sure whether or not your anger has ever reached those heights, but I know that all of us have experienced the intense emotion of anger. For me, anger is the most physical of feelings. You can sense the heat rising in your body, the steam releasing from your ears. Maybe your palms begin to sweat as the simmer turns to boil.

Anger, like its close relative fear, can also be remarkably effective. There is a laser-like focus in anger, removing all ambiguity and nuance. Anger drills down hard on the absolute truth we hold and the absurdity of any other perspective. And, perhaps most importantly, there is a kind of satisfaction in anger, a self-justifying quality. Unchecked anger seeks fertile ground for exponential growth. Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner puts it this way: *“Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome*

morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”ⁱ

I want to be clear that anger has its place in our lives and in the good and meaningful work of the church. There is a wonderful Franciscan blessing that includes the line, “May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.” Anger at what *is* can drive us to actions that bring change. But the kind of anger Jonah displays here is not that kind. Jonah is angry because God’s judgment is not as severe as his, he is livid because God’s justice is defined by God’s grace, irate because God is more generous than he believes God ought to be.

I mentioned earlier that the open-ended nature of this book reminds me of the parables. Specifically, the story reminds me of the parable Jesus tells in the twentieth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Like Jonah, this parable ends in a question asked to those who have found generosity unjust. *Are you envious because I am generous? Is it right for you to be angry?*

When you have two young children, there is a phrase that is drilled into your head by the endless repetition that it enjoys. ***That’s not fair!*** For Jonah, for those early-arriving laborers in the vineyard, it is as simple as that. No fair. But here’s the thing about how we treat those we love. Fairness isn’t the highest goal. When you are driven by unconditional love for the individuality of each precious soul, comparison loses its currency. Grace is not measured or doled out from a limited supply.

There is no easy way to say this, which may be the reason Jesus did it in a parable or our ancient Hebrew ancestors worked it into a fish story. We don’t get to choose the God we get. We’ve got the God there is. And woven into the very being of this God, from the beginning of the story until the last word is written, is grace. Amazing, expansive, irrational, indefensible grace.

The landowner in the parable, like God in the

story of Jonah, does not even attempt to defend the action on the grounds of fairness. The purpose is generosity. This is the kingdom of heaven, where justice means more than simple reciprocity and fairness doesn’t always mean everybody gets the same thing for the same effort.

I’ve been wondering this week; what if those who belong to these stories of extravagant grace did more than tell them to each other on Sunday mornings? What if we lived as if they are the truth? What if we channeled our anger at the way things are not toward solutions that we deem *fair* but toward actions that demonstrate the generous love of God? What if sacred scripture describes the nature of reality in a way that we cannot fully fathom until we begin to do what it says?

I was talking this week to a friend in another part of the country who has a sibling with a number of profound special needs. I asked him whether this family dynamic ever evoked envy or a kind of sibling rivalry. He confessed that it had early on, but then he said, “over time I came to recognize the amazing gift my parents had given me. They loved my brother the way he needed to be loved, and they loved me the way I needed to be loved. It wasn’t the same because we aren’t the same. This taught me a lot about how to love.”

I think it teaches us a lot about how God loves. The God who, in story after story, reaches toward the one who needs grace the most. The Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, the late Laborers, the citizens of Nineveh. Again and again, grace eclipses fairness. Love is offered in the way it is needed. This is the God we have. It made Jonah furious. He deserved a nap in the shade more than the evil Ninevites deserved God’s forgiveness. Maybe so. But deserve is not a very highly valued word in the economy of God’s reign, where grace is not a zero-sum game and none of us can lay exclusive claim to preferred status.

Friends at Second and all who worship the God of grace, don’t be Jonah. You can quote scripture until you are blue in the face, shout out other voices with triumphant proclamations asserting divine favoritism; you can boast and brag about how much

faith you have or how devoted you are to the idea of God's grace—the fact remains that the only proof of our love of God that we have to offer is the life we live. The only role we have in the story of God's extravagant grace is to pay forward what God has offered us.

This is the God we have. The last will be first, and the first will be last.

It is the ultimate parable punch line. It is justice redefined by generosity. It is ultimately good news for all of us. Listen to this. God chooses grace. For God's sake, we must do the same. Amen.

ⁱ Buechner, Frederick. *Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004. 18.