

Typically, after an election, some are rejoicing while others are grieving. And so it was this week, I'm certain. We seem to have reached a point in our polarized nation where people on opposite sides cannot understand each other. Some may even be tempted to give up on one another. Some are struggling to understand or are have lost respect for who we are as a nation, while others have great hope that finally we'll get on "the right track." The chasm between neighbors and sometimes even between fellow church members and family members has deepened. It has become harder and harder to understand those of different political conviction— we are looking at the same circumstances and seeing at least two completely different realities, it seems. And sometimes I think this inability results in deep distrust, devaluation, and even dehumanization.

Perhaps we're well situated to understand Jonah's feelings about Nineveh. Nineveh was located in Assyria, an empire that had been brutal to the people of Israel, to Judeans in particular. As one commentator points out "If you visit the British Museum, you can see spectacular wall reliefs depicting Assyrian sieges. The famous siege of Lachish shows multiple images of Judeans being impaled, and stacks of Judean heads (yes, disembodied heads) that were counted by Assyrian scribes, presumably for a pay per head policy with the soldiers. Archaeologists discovered this relief in Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh (you can read about that in 2 Kings 18-21)." The little girl who told us the story of Jonah today suggests he was scared to go to Nineveh and that this is why he took flight by sea in precisely the opposite direction (Nineveh is in modern day Iraq; Tarshish is in modern day Spain.) With a history like this you can imagine he might have been afraid.

But why does Jonah suggest he didn't want to go to Nineveh? Because even though God gave him a message of judgment to preach, he knew that God was a God of mercy and suspected that the wretched Ninevites wouldn't get their come uppance. He wanted to see the destruction he was asked to preach. He wanted the enemies of his people to suffer. And he was supremely bitter when they did not. Even though by all measures he had the MOST success of any prophet preacher EVER— 120,000 plus people AND their animals in sackcloth and ashes, repenting and turning their lives around in response to a one sentence sermon delivered by a foreign prophet— 40 days

more and Ninevah will be overthrown. The little girl suggested he had more to say, but the Bible gives us one sentence. And in response to this one sentence everyone turns around, EVERYONE. Not only that but earlier in the story all the sailors end up praying to Jonah's God— he's converting souls left and right. For someone so successful, he's awfully grumpy and petulant. Too grumpy and petulant to realize that the same grace that kept him from drowning is that which was poured out upon the Ninevites. For such blatant disobedience God could surely have let him perish, but no. God had mercy upon Jonah, in response to Jonah's fervent prayers... and for a moment Jonah was grateful. But the same mercy being shown to his enemies made him bitter.

November 1st was All Saint's Day. In a book of the Bible you would expect the prophet in the story to be, for sure, a saint... but the most saintly characters in today's story are the sailors who resisted throwing him overboard and prayed to God for mercy and the Ninevites, including their leader, who repented and waited on God's mercy. As Protestant Christians we believe that all baptized believers are simultaneously sinners and saints— and this means that when we remember all the saints we remember quite a diverse and motley crew— with room for wicked Ninevites and petulant prophets too.

Kathleen Norris tells this story of the day she joined the church "Before the service, the new members gathered with some of the elders. One was a man I'd never liked very much. I'll call him Ed. He'd always seemed ill-tempered to me, and also a terrible gossip, epitomizing the small mindedness that can make small-town life such a trial. The minister had asked him to formally greet the new members. Standing awkwardly before our small group, Ed cleared his throat and mumbled, 'I'd like to welcome you to the body of Christ.' The minister's mouth dropped open, as did mine— neither of us had ever heard words remotely like this come from Ed's mouth. Like distant thunder, the words made me more alert, attuned to further disruptions in the atmosphere. What had I gotten myself into? I was astonished to realize, as that service began, that while I may never like Ed very much, I had just been commanded to love him. My own small mind had just been jolted, and the world seemed larger, opened in a new way.

"Ed's words, those few, simple words of welcome, had power. Like the sacrament of baptism, they seemed to have made an indelible mark on my soul. And they had real import for me during the service. As I went forward on shaky legs to the front of the church, to join the others who were becoming members that day, my eye happened to catch the disbelieving and most unwelcoming expression on the face of a younger woman, an extremely conservative member of the congregation. Absurdly, my mind jumped to that classic Western movie line: 'This town ain't big enough for the both of us.' I felt a twinge for her, for both of us, I didn't want to be there, doing this, any more than she wanted me to be invading her sacred turf with my doubts, my suspect Christianity, so unlike her own. I nearly turned around. But I couldn't because I had just been welcomed into the body of Christ."

Friends, we've been welcomed into the body of Christ, and joined to people quite unlike us, people we might not even like that much. That's the thing about grace— it's big... and it's for the underserving... may that grace heal all the division and distrust and strengthen our connections in Christ, knitting us together with love and hope. May Christ's Body, the church - us - be a sign and foretaste that it can be so...

Sources cited in this sermon:

Roger Nam. "Commentary on Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10; [4:1-11]" on the *Working Preacher website*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jonah-and-gods-mercy-2/48644>

Kathleen Norris. "Chosen" in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, pp 139-143. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.