

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Jonah 4:1-11 **“God’s Annoying Mercy”**

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIC: JONAH 4:1-11 "THE ANNOYING MERCY OF GOD"

Their Salvation Is Jonah's Disaster

1) vv.1-2 Jonah's Dialog On God's Character (A Biblical Creed). //1:17-2:10 (Prayer)

1 But it (i.e. the mass Ninevite repentance) displeased Jonah greatly, and he was **angry**. *Was a great evil, burned*

2 And he prayed to the LORD (Yahweh) and said, **Covenant Name Again, 2:1 (last time in belly of fish!)**

Question "Alas, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? **Information Gap, Prayer = Complain, Argue**

That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; **We Finally Learn The Objection**

a for I knew that thou art a gracious God **5 Marks, See Ex. 34:6-8 For 12 "Attributes" of God**

b and merciful (womb-like),/ **1 Kgs. 19:2, Jer. 11:18-23, 12:1-6, 15:10-21, 20:7-18, Genre = Prophetic Complaint:**

c slow to anger, **1) Accusation, 2) Relevant Divine Character, 3) Explanation Or Correction**

d and abounding in steadfast love,/ **Sees Imbalance In God's Character: Holy Justice/ Holy Mercy, Love**

e and repentest of evil.// **3:10, Joel 2:13, Ex. 32:12, Jonah Knew God's Character**

Confession Fragments: 2 Chron. 30:9, Neh. 9:31, Ps. 111:4, 112:4, Sir. 2:11

2) vv.3-5 Jonah's Death Prayer, God's Question, Jonah's Response.

Jonah Did Not Mind Being Saved From The Fish, But Not Nineveh!

a) v.3 Jonah's Death Petition.

Jonah's Ultimatum, "Either destroy them or kill me!"

3 Therefore now, O LORD, **Jonah Wants God To Be Other Than God Is = Tribal Jewish Deity**

take my life from me, I beseech thee, it is better for me to die than to live." **Jonah Is Daring God!**

Question

b) v.4 LORD'S Counter-Question On Reason For Excessive Anger.

4 And the LORD said, "Do you *do well* to be **angry**?" **Self-examination, Probing Personal Question, 3:1**

Lit, "Is your anger (heat) that intense?"

c) v.5 Jonah's Response: Non-Verbal, Set Up Watch. = *Prophetic Interview*, 1 Kgs. 19:3-18

5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city, **Gen. 4:16, Dialog Stops, Jonah Again Flees**

and made a booth for himself there. **A Little Hut, Inadequacy Of His Own Constructs!**

He stood in it under the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. **Will God Act?**

3) v.6 Salvation Demonstrated In Nature: Jonah Is Glad At His Relief.

6 And the LORD God appointed a plant (vine), and made it come up over Jonah, **1:17a, New Title**

that it might be a shade over his head to save him from his discomfort (evil). **Mercy**

So Jonah was **exceedingly glad** because of the plant. **Saved From Desert Heat**

Abundant Provision Beyond The Hut

3') vv.7-8 Judgment Demonstrated In Nature: Jonah Is Now Despondent.

7 But when dawn came up the next day,

God appointed a worm which attacked the plant, so that it withered. **Strict Justice**

8 When the sun rose (higher), God **Violent Images: attacked, beat**

appointed a cutting east wind, and the sun beat on the head of Jonah **so that he was faint;**

No Mercy = What Jonah Wanted For Nineveh

2') vv.8b-9 Jonah's Death Petition, God's Question, Jonah's Response.

If I Want Strict Justice For Others, Do I Want It For Myself?

a) v.8b Jonah's Death Petition.

and he asked that he might die, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." **Nothing Has Changed**

How Can God Be Faithful To Israel And Show Mercy To Nineveh?

b) v.9a LORD'S Counter-Question On Reason For Excessive Anger.

9 But God said to Jonah, **Mercy Is Snatched Away**

Question "Do you *do well* to be **angry** (heated) for the plant?" **Climate And Jonah Are Hot! Same Question As 4:4**

c) v.9b Jonah's Response: Justify Himself.

And he said, **Only Way To Escape God's Justice**

"I *do well* to be **angry, angry** enough to die." **Unteachable Jonah Is Unchanged, Not Share God's Heart**

Final Question = Who Needs A Change Of Heart?

1') vv.10-11 God's Reflection On God's Character (A Revelation Of Compassion).

10 And the LORD said, **Divine Mercy Triumphs Over Divine Justice = Jonah's Nightmare**

"You pity the plant, for which you did not labor,/ nor did you make it grow,/ **A Gift! Continues To Hear Divine Voice**

which came into being in a night/ and perished in a night.// **Jonah Only Thought Of Himself!**

11 And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, **Stakes Are High For God! God Reasons With His Reluctant Prophet**

in which are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons, **God's Concern: People/Animals**

Question who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" **Dt. 5:32, Ends With A Question**

WHAT THE U.M. CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT THE PERSON AND ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The U.M. Articles of Religion, Article I:Of Faith in the Holy Trinity

There is but one¹ living² and true³ God, everlasting⁴, without body⁵ or parts⁶, of infinite power⁷, wisdom⁸, and goodness⁹; the maker¹⁰ and preserver¹¹ of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost¹².

Article I: Of Faith in the Holy Trinity offers twelve perfections of God grounded in Scripture:

- 1) God's simple unity: God is one of a kind, not one among others;
- 2) God's vitality: God is supremely alive and the origin of all life;
- 3) God's veracity: God is utterly truthful;
- 4) God's eternity: the everlasting God is without beginning or end, self-existent;
- 5) God's incorporeality: God is without a body and thus beyond gender;
- 6) God's indivisibility: God cannot be divided into pieces or is separable;
- 7) God's omnipotence: the Almighty has all power necessary to accomplish his will;
- 8) God's omniscience: God is supremely wise, knowing what may be known;
- 9) God's omni-benevolence: God's person and work surpass human concepts of goodness;
- 10) God's creativity: God is the maker of all things, not only the visible, but what is beyond sight: heaven and the angelic realms;
- 11) God's preservation: God upholds and sustains the entire creation continually;
- 12) God's complex unity: God is a Trinitarian communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit .

The U.M. Confession Of Faith Article 1: God

(added in 1968 at merger with EUB's)

We believe in the one true, holy¹³ and living God, Eternal Spirit¹⁴, who is Creator, Sovereign¹⁵ and Preserver of all things visible and invisible. He is infinite in power, wisdom, justice¹⁶, goodness and love¹⁷, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men¹⁸, to the glory of his name¹⁹. We believe the one God reveals himself²⁰ as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.

C.F. Article I:Of God from *The Confession of Faith* adds eight more attributes of God from Scripture:

- 13) God's holiness: God is other than creation and without sin or evil;
- 14) God's form of life: God is eternal Spirit and not matter as we know it;
- 15) God's sovereignty: God rules actively over all;
- 16) God's righteousness: God is just and justified in all actions;
- 17) God's love: God is concerned for our welfare and acts to that end at high cost;
- 18) God's graciousness: God rules with kind regard for the well-being and salvation of all;
- 19) God's jealousy: God is to be glorified in worship and in life. This is the purpose of every creature and the path to life in God's kingdom;
- 20) God's self-revelation: God has complete competence to be self-revealed to image-bearing persons in creation, in conscience, in the choice of Israel, in Jesus Christ, in Scripture, in the illuminations of the Holy Spirit. While mystery remains, an over-emphasis here diminishes divine competence. To claim to know little of God is not humility.

The two Articles assert and confess these related characteristics as a brief portrayal of the One and Triune God whose story is preserved in the Bible and who is worshiped in the church. The God who remains beyond full comprehension (divine mystery) has given true insight into the divine nature and purpose. **No United Methodist can remain faithful and say, "We know little about God."** Ours is a substantial account to be explored.

THE ANNOYING MERCY OF GOD

"And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

God the therapist probing Jonah's rage.

J O N A H 4 : 4

A teacher from the East sat praying under a tree with large, exposed roots. As he prayed a scorpion, hanging on one of the roots, began to move slowly towards the sage. A young boy passing by saw the scorpion inches away from the one in prayer and shouted, "Teacher, quick, kill the scorpion; it's about to sting you!"

The Teacher looked up at the scorpion and slowly moved a short distance before speaking to the lad, "Just because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting is no reason I should change my nature to save."¹

Jonah did not understand; his constricted heart was filled with petty, puny, self-centered anger. He was annoyed at God's mercy and nature to save. He wanted God to be a Jewish God only, not a global God.

A review of Jonah story to this point is helpful. In Chapter 1 the stench of Nineveh's sin became unbearable. Divine patience grows thin; judgment draws near. As a seasoned prophet, Jonah receives an assignment. "Go to Mosul," says the Lord, "and tell ISIS they're on a very short string with me." "No," says Jonah with his feet and heads off in the opposite direction to Tarshish, "away from the presence of the Lord." *Down* to the port, *down* onto the ship, *down* into the hold, *down* into the sea, *down* into the depths. Away from God is not away but *down, down, down*. Ironically, through Jonah's disobedience the ship's pagan crew is converted to the Lord from whom Jonah flees. God saves the Gentiles, though Jonah is unaware of what transpired on the decks after his removal. He delivered the Word but missed the joy.

¹ Adapted from William White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 49.

Jonah 4:1-11 5

In chapter 2 we find Jonah swallowed, and in the belly of fish for three days and nights he has time to reflect and fast and pray. His prayer is a beautiful composition from the Psalms. Jonah knows his theology and liturgy. He's a great writer of prayers, but that's not his problem. He knows all *about* God, but he doesn't know God's *ways*. He know God's Word but not God's heart. He knew the hymn *Amazing Grace* but grace had not yet made Jonah gracious. He could pray for rescue for himself, but had a hard time extending it to others. He had a huge blind spot when it came to mercy. But God graciously heard Jonah chanting his prayer in the hollows of the fish, and so Jonah was vomited forth, hurled back onto dry land, and I like to think it was on a compass course to Nineveh.

In chapter 3, and for a second time, the Lord calls Jonah to be his ambassador to Nineveh; this time Jonah obeys. Wouldn't you? Looking over your shoulder at a whale bobbing just beyond the breakers with a big smile. Wondering if a lion or jackal might cross your path if you fled by land and not by sea. Feeling hemmed in with few options. It was weeks of walking to the East followed by a day's journey into the great city where he announced, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown." Only five words in Hebrew, a minimal message, hoping no one hears.

Then something happened. The whole place repented in two great waves from the bottom up. First the people, then the king and his court in sackcloth and ashes; even the animals fasted and brayed their prayers to God. It was an massive awakening, not rigged by man but sent from above. Lights came on in hearts and minds; the whole city saw their folly and wickedness and peril. It was messy, and it was loud. It cut across social class and spread like wildfire. The city was *overthrown*, but not as Jonah wanted; it was not destroyed but turned upside down and right side up by God. God visited the city with a great gift, which is the power to change directions and embrace a new future. The presence of the true God, the God of the Jews and Creator of all, was near and calling for an about face.

At a deep level it's the same as Jesus' first words in Mark, "Repent, turn around, change you minds." And why? "because the kingdom of God has drawn near enough to be touched."² Chapter 3, verse 10 is the turning point: "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

² 1:15, paraphrase.

Jonah 4:1-11 6

God is everywhere; it's what the word *omnipresent* means. But when God shifts the mode of divine presence from general to specific and from invisible to seen and from hidden in the background to felt- in other words *when God comes near*- life does not have to stay the same; trajectories can change and revolutions happen. Sailors on rough seas and cities in peril can be changed. But without a Word from God and the holy presence that must accompany it, we cannot turn around in our own power. We are like solar panels on which light must shine for anything to happen. Jonah told the truth, but God gave the juice.

We do not repent when we choose but when God offers an opportunity. A door opens, a light shines, a voice is heard; it rings in the soul with the echo of truth, and we have a decision to make. And if we say *Yes* a new world opens up; and if we say *No*, the light within us dims; we harden a bit and grow a bit deafer as life tilts downward. Either way, we're changed. When God comes near, everyone changes. No one is left the same: some for the better, others for the worse.

The Phoenician sailors on deck had been saved; the fall of Nineveh had been postponed for a season, but what about old Jonah? The first and last problem of the story is not the paganism and polytheism of the sailors or the overt wickedness and violence of Nineveh but the narrow-mind and puny heart of God's prophet. From beginning to end Jonah is no hero. He's not an attractive character. He disobeys a call, runs away, puts others in danger, repeatedly threatens suicide, obeys only under pressure, hopes for the destruction of his audience, and finally goes into a rage and pouts like a spoiled child even as God patiently reasons with him. Yet God used him anyway, in spite of- and even through- his weaknesses.

As a preacher I find that both unnerving and encouraging. It is possible not to be changed by the very message you offer others? Yes it is; it's an occupational hazard of having a call and having something to say on Sundays. You must eat what you serve others; you must open your heart to the Word that comes out of your mouth. You must hear your own preaching as part of the audience. And if you don't, you risk ending up like Jonah: a biblical joke, a bad example, a preacher who missed the joy of God's kindness. Phoenician sailors are converted, Nineveh is converted; the only unconverted person in the whole book is Jonah!

Sometime I'll say something that startles me. It came of my mouth, but where did it come from? A prosperous man was once giving me a hard time about my car, that it wasn't new enough for *his pastor* to drive, and I said, "If I don't have an impressive life, an impressive car's not going to help." We both stood there stunned.

Truth had erupted.

On another occasion I'd worked hard on a sermon, but because something more important came up between Friday and Sunday, I didn't get to preach it. A woman asked me, "Are you disappointed you didn't get to preach after all that work?" "Not really," I said, "I'd already gotten *the goodie* out of it for me." I'd never thought of that till I said it.

You are the secondary, not the primary audience; I'm the first audience, and if I remember that I may be protected from *the Jonah syndrome*, from offering you what I've not received. You must live in the light you shine on others, else your soul shrivels like Jonah. Jonah is a book about evangelism and missions; it's also about how not to miss God while occupying a pulpit.

TURNING TO THE TEXT.

Come, Let Us Reason Together

The translation of chapter 4, verse 1 does not do justice to the emotional realities. A better translation might be, "But this was evil to Jonah with a great evil and it made him fiercely angry."³ When Nineveh repents, Jonah seethes, boils and explodes:

"I knew what kind of God you were which is why I ran away. I thought this might happen. I know who you are. It's in our creed from Exodus where you say 'gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, repenting of evil.' But why Nineveh? These people deserve fire, and you cave into a few tears and a handful of ashes tossed in the air. What kind of wimp are you? Where's your divine backbone? I preach destruction, and you change your mind. You played me with a play on words. Why don't you protect your own people instead of worrying about pagans? Aren't you our God first?"

Our author is kind enough to call it a prayer, but it's an accusation, an invitation to theological debate.⁴ What Jonah wants is for God to change his mind

³ John Kohlenberger, *Jonah and Nahum* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 1984), 65.

⁴ The genre here is a formal *prophetic complaint*, typically in three parts: 1) An invocation of YHWH, including a charge of injustice (vv.1-2a) , 2) an oracle confessing

again and judge these people. Not until the end of the story do we hear why Jonah fled in the first place. We've been wondering, and now we know. It was because he knew Nineveh might repent and God relent. For the third time now we see that Jonah knows his theology. To the sailors he confessed the Creed, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land."⁵ In the belly of the fish he quotes the Psalms and composes an elegant prayer of thanks, and here he shakes God's character in his face. For all his dogmatic correctness, Jonah is a stranger to God's heart of mercy. Like the older son in the parable of the prodigal, he lives in the father's house but does not know his father's heart towards prodigals who wander or those who stay at home. Jonah has missed something.

But there's something good here as well. Jonah takes his strongest emotions and directs them to God. They have a history and a relationship. How often I have sat with angry, depressed people and said, "Why don't you tell God what you just told me, how mad and hurt and disappointed you are?"

They look dumbfounded, "Why, I couldn't say that to God!"

I chuckle, "You think he doesn't know? You think he might not be up to it? Think you might knock him off his throne? Think God might zap you?"

Our polite understanding of prayer is much too constricted. Prayer is not just nice words spoken to a nice God. It is the whole self with all its range of emotions brought into focus. Read the Psalms. Most of them are someone crying out to God and none to happy about the treatment they've been receiving. Leave the honest expression of the full range of emotions out of a marriage and you get a hollow marriage. Leave the full range of emotions out of prayer and you have little intimacy with God. Anger is a powerful way to connect, and those who never allow themselves to feel it or express it to God will stay in the shallows of the faith. Odd as it sounds, taking the dark and powerful emotion of anger to God is actually a sign of trust. Eugene Peterson writes:

"Quarreling with God is a time-honored practice: Moses, Job, David, and Peter were all masters at it. Those of us in ministry get a lot of

some aspect of the divine character that is relevant to the accusation (v.2b), 3) a reproach that requests an explanation or correction of the injustice (v.3). Examples from Jeremiah are 1:18-23, 12:1-6, 15:10-21, 20:7-18 (Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 151.

⁵ 1:9.

practice in it because we are dealing with God in some way or other most of the time, and God doesn't behave the way we expect. Jonah is quarreling because his idea of what God is supposed to do and what God in fact does differ radically. Jonah is angry."⁶

Anger is useful; it's a flashing light something's wrong. Listening to your anger and tracing its tangled tentacles is a useful spiritual discipline for those who have the courage to know the truth. Along with its siblings: frustration, irritation, resentment, and hostility, anger is one of the *adrenaline* emotions that rouses us to fight or flight. Dr. Arch Hart writes that "in its earliest stages, anger is simply a signal that we have been hurt or our rights infringed- physically or psychologically. It tells us we've been violated," or at least that we think so.⁷ Jonah is burning adrenaline by the quart. He feels violated by God, his loyalty to his people betrayed.

It's no sin to be angry. It is destructive not to pay attention to it or to translate it into aggression or hostility. Anger turned inwards creates depression, which is just what we see as Jonah contemplates suicide and screams at God to kill him. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 4:26-27, "Be angry (a command) but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, *and give no opportunity to the devil.*" We are commanded to be angry, but when anger is not handled in short order it becomes a doorway through which Satan can stroll into a life unnoticed. It matures into a seething hostility which rots the bones of those who hold it dear.

The whole of this passage can be understood from a counseling standpoint as God working with Jonah to uncover the roots of his anger and examine them. Jonah is angry with God, but God's not angry with Jonah. God is patient with Jonah, seeking to draw him out of his performance trap into an experience of amazing grace.

Jonah was so angry and depressed he wanted to die. He'd rather die than face living in a world where God was different than he thought. The Lord probed him, "Do you do well to be angry? Is you anger that intense?" The divine psychiatrist received no reply. Jonah said not a word but went out and built a booth (a little lean-to) east of the city, sat there and sulked, daring God not to do what he promised, "It's

⁶ "A Pastor's Quarrel with God," *Leadership*, Winter 1993, 127.

⁷ *Adrenalin and Stress* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 142-143. On the increase of anger in America, see Eric Metaxas, "Angry America," *Break Point Commentaries* (12-10-13),

either them or me!” He wants Nineveh fried. Jonah is stubborn in wanting God to be other than merciful. He first fled west towards Tarshish; he now goes east in hopes God will withdraw his mercy. He can then go home and say, “Let me tell you what *our God* did to those uncircumcised pagans.”

An Enacted Parable And Dialog

Since Jonah will not talk, the ever-inventive Lord arranges a little laboratory experience in salvation and judgment. It was probably the fast-growing and large-leafed castor oil plant, *Ricinus communis* in Latin. We would say, "And the Lord appointed kudzu to grow up and cover Jonah's booth with shade." Jonah's mood changed immediately, verse 6: "So Jonah was *exceedingly glad* because of the plant." God meets Jonah's childish petulance with a miracle of grace. "One would now think that Jonah would realize how God's grace is extended even and always toward those who are undeserving of it."⁸

Jonah had gone from a down to up. His depression flipped to euphoria, and the height of the one is a mirror image of the depth of the other. The Lord gives his hot-headed prophet a cooling off period; he is as merciful with his prophet as with Nineveh. God loves Israelites; God loves Ninevites; God loves the Jonah who hates Ninevites; my enemies are not necessarily God’s enemies.

But the next morning Jonah experiences the judgment of God. A worm is sent to wither the shady plant; a hot desert wind dries Jonah out as the sun bakes him to near collapse. Verse 8: "And the sun beat on the head of Jonah *so that he was faint*." First angry, then elated, now faint and despondent. Jonah needs a mood-stabilizer!

If anything, this teaches that God is able to arrange just the circumstance we require. If we quit talking to God, other means will get our attention. The Lord appointed *a wind* to rock the boat, *a fish* to swallow and regurgitate the prophet, *a vine* to cover the booth, *a worm* to kill the vine, *a hot wind* to sear his skin and bake his brain. All of creation is available to the Creator for the divine pedagogy. That Jonah is out control and out of touch is witnessed by the fact that he returns to the depths of the black hole of depression and contemplates suicide a second time, "It is better for me to die than to live."

⁸ G. Knight and F. Golka, *The Song of Songs and Jonah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1988), 121.

Jonah 4:1-11 11

Suicide is never an answer. For those who believe the lie and take their own lives, we trust God's mercy and try to understand the mental torment that led them to such a foolish, selfish act. But to step into heaven with your own blood on your hands is a bad experience. There in the light I suspect their first thought is, "Oh no, what have I done?" and, "Why did I not see the help that was offered me?"

Is suicide unforgivable? No. Is it forgivable? Yes. But if those who carry it out could see the confusion and pain and hurt and anger it leaves upon others for generations, they would reconsider, unless perhaps that was their purpose all along. "I'll show them," is not a safe thought. Jonah can't see how God can be both the protector of Israel and the Savior of Nineveh; he'd rather die than continue in the service of God who tempers judgment with lavish mercy, especially for non-Jews. Jonah the Jew does not want *our God* to be *their God* too.

My freshman year at Wake Forest was nearly a disaster. I was a real jerk and blind to my own *jerkness*. When I came to Christ that next summer in great pain, I returned to school in the fall with a new heart but not a lot of knowledge about how to live out my new life as a follower of Jesus. I was later told that when I started showing up at worship and Bible studies on campus one guy said, "I hear Thrailkill got saved. Now we have to love that jerk and teach him the ropes." And they did, and it saved my life. I was the Ninevite Jonah wanted to hate.

Jonah doesn't know it yet, but God set him up. He's been cornered for a second time, first in the belly of the whale, now on the hillside with all the noise of repentance below. "Jonah," the Lord asked, "do you do well to be angry for the plant?" If he answers *No*, God has him. It wasn't Jonah's plant in the first place. He admits God can do as God wishes with creation. If he answers *Yes*, God has him again. Doesn't Jonah know people are more important than plants? God speaks, "You pity the plant, an ephemeral thing that comes and goes in a day, and should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who are morally ignorant, and also much cattle?"

Recently Lori gave her third graders a homework assignment of using five vocabulary words in complete sentences, and one of the words was *ignorant*, which she carefully explained as lack of knowledge. When she came in the next evening she was chuckling, and when I asked why, she handed me one student's paper which read, "Ya'll is some ignorant children!" Be careful of the words you assign! But that is precisely what God said about Nineveh, "Ya'll is some ignorant children, on whom I choose to have mercy!"

Jonah 4:1-11 12

It was not enough for Jonah to finally obey and go to Nineveh. What God finally desired for Jonah was a heart large enough to comprehend the logic of divine mercy which is always unreasonable according to human calculations. That God cares passionately for Nineveh and New York, for Charlotte and Charleston, for Karaganda and Osaka and Greenwood, even down to the beasts that live among us as our servants and companions.

If we begrudge God's love, care, and forgiveness to any creature, we've missed the center of God's heart which is passionate love, love willing to absorb the pain of the world and transform it. If we are annoyed by the mercy of God, it's because we do not yet understand what God has done for us. That we come from and are made for love, which in a sinful and broken world must take the form of mercy, of undeserved help. It is here that the message of Jonah points beyond itself to the sign of God's suffering love we most value, the cross of Jesus Christ. Terence Fretheim writes:

"God takes upon himself the evil of Nineveh. He bears the weight of its violence, the pain of a thousand plundered cities, including Israel's. His tears flow instead of theirs. Someday he may even choose to die."⁹

Was Jonah converted? Did he commit suicide? Did he find a good doctor and get his brain chemistry re-calibrated? He was angry, happy, sad, silent and withdrawn, then angry and suicidal again all in one conversation. Jonah was a true prophet and a true jerk with a mood disorder and a hard heart. Jonah is not a hero; Jonah is a mess, but he's God's mess, and the Lord got some mileage and a great story out of the man. To be a pastor or prophet or a simple believer does not insulate us from human frailty.

Did Jonah perhaps continue to obey God dutifully out of fear and respect without ever understanding the love of God for himself and outsiders? It's not that he didn't love, only that his love was limited to his own people. The book ends with God's final question and is thus open-ended, "And should I not pity Nineveh?" It's not only a question to Jonah but to us, "Do you understand my love?" asks God. "Will you let me teach you? Beyond using you to get my Word out, Jonah, I welcome you into my heart. Will you stay a slave, or will you become my son?" As far as the story goes, Jonah's still sits on the hillside and God's question is unanswered.

⁹ http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/27-2_Jonah/27-2_Fretheim.pdf.

Bernard of Clairvaux was a twelfth century monk some have called the *apostle of love*.¹⁰ He is most famous for his understanding of the *four degrees* of love. The first is that we *love the self for the self's sake*. It's a natural human affection, but if this is all it eventually becomes narcissism, the love of the self alone. In one of her movies Bett Middler said to a friend, "That's enough about me. Let's talk about you. What do you think of me?" Level one is the love of the self for the sake of the self. It's the necessary beginning point, OK in children and adolescents, but not at all attractive in adults. To stay the center of your world is to become very small.

Second is *the love of God for the self's sake*. I love God because of God's blessings. This is the love of the new convert and the permanently immature believer. I love the Giver because of the gifts and help God gives. We all know about this, and recognize it as a true beginning of faith. God does stuff for me. Many adult Christians never get past this point.

Third is *the love of God for God's sake*. Those who move to this degree love God in spite of life's pain. The focus is on the beauty of God; the self and its incessant demands are put on hold and de-centered. Bad things may happen, but God is still loved. The self may even be neglected in ascetic practices.

But there is a fourth degree that brings us full circle, and that is *the love of the self for God's sake*, to see ourselves and then others through divine eyes.¹¹ It is the most mature, the hardest and rarest, to love ourselves because we see ourselves and others through God's gaze. Here we have crossed a line here and look back on life from a divine perspective. No longer God's kids saying, "Gimme, gimme, gimme;" no longer just God's helpers, we become God's friends. One of the questions asked of all Methodist pastors at their admission to the Conference is this one, "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?"¹² It is followed by another, "Are you earnestly striving after it?" As a goal Bernard would approve of both. But if you want to know how I'm doing, just as Lori!

¹⁰ See the article, "Bernard of Clairvaux on Love," Christian History Institute, www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/bernard/

¹¹ Richard Foster and James Smith, *Devotional Classics* (New York, NY: Harper-Collins, 1993), 40-45.

¹² *The Book of Discipline 2012*, 262.

God wanted Jonah and all Israel to grow in love. To see Nineveh, all its inhabitants through the merciful eyes of God who wishes all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. To be annoyed with God's mercy like Jonah says little about God and much about us. Jonah was internally blocked from getting to level four. Where are you in this journey to love God with all you are and others as an overflow? The most important prayer is for an increase in love, and it will wreck your world. The heart of the One who showed up in Jesus is bigger than we think.

CONCLUSION

The Power of Forgiveness is a collection of seven short clips that reveal the difficulties and effects forgiveness can have in the lives of people who give it, or in the lives of those who refuse. One centers on holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. It begins with footage of Jewish families being ushered into Nazi concentration camps as the narrator speaks:

"Elie Wiesel was one of the few who lived to walk out of the camps; his father died only weeks before the end of the war. For the next 10 years, he was virtually silent about the experience. For the last half-century, his gift for putting words to the nightmare that was the holocaust has helped generations to never forget."

The camera shifts to Wiesel speaking inside a camp, "So look and listen," he says. "Close your eyes and listen, but open your hearts and listen. Listen to the question we asked ourselves then: 'What happened here?'"

The scene shifts again as an elderly Wiesel reflects on the emotions he experienced in attempts to grapple with the holocaust later in life. "I composed a prayer saying, 'God of mercy, have no mercy on these souls, on these murderers of children. God of compassion, have no compassion on those who killed these children.'"

The image shifts again to Jewish children rolling up their sleeves to reveal the numbers that replaced their names. "I was criticized all over the world," he says, "But I still feel it. Some persons do not deserve forgiveness; those are the persons who went beyond the human capacity for evil. They went beyond it."¹³

¹³ *The Power of Forgiveness* (Journey Films, 2008), written and directed by Martin Doblmeier, found at www.preachingtoday.com search under *Jonah 4*.

Jonah 4:1-11 15

For all his moral insight and literary acclaim, there sits Wiesel with his old friend Jonah, and God’s question is still unanswered, “And should I not pity Nineveh?”

It’s a very hard question, and Jonah is not yet convinced.

But if you come to the table today, you are saying, “Jesus, grow me deeper into your kind of love.” I just want you to know where you’re headed, which is deep into the heart of God.

