

“Sharing Grace”

January 25, 2015

God Revealed series – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

This quote was in an E-mail I received from a friend: “Someone said, ‘Show me where God is.’ So I said, “Show me where God isn’t.” That statement struck me and made me stop and think for a minute. “Someone said, ‘Show me where God is.’ So I said, ‘Show me where God isn’t.”

Remember that Epiphany is the feast of light, and as we reflect on that, these weeks are a time to be especially attentive to the ways God works all around us, even in the unexpected.

And it may seem strange to jump back to Jonah, but his experience and struggle with God is unique. We’ve talked about prophets before – how they usually don’t ask for the job of being God’s servant. Sometimes they really don’t want the job at all! Jonah is a perfect example. He is a prophet of Israel sent to Gentiles in Nineveh - a powerful reminder that God’s love is for all the world - Jew and Gentile alike.

Usually when we think of Jonah, what do we think of first? THE WHALE! But even though you have a small candy fish to take home today, there’s much more here than just a guy being swallowed by a big fish. Jonah teaches us that the hard part of following God is following God! Maybe that sounds simple, but it’s true. Jonah struggles to accept God’s plan. Jonah’s call and his work are an exercise in sharing grace with people he doesn’t think deserve it.

God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the people to turn back to God. A little background: Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians were Israel’s main enemy. Assyria conquered the Israel in 721 BC. So for an audience to hear that Jonah, an Israelite, is sent to talk about God to the people of Nineveh, who aren’t Israelites, is a big deal.

And Jonah really doesn’t want this job! He hates Nineveh. So he runs away to try to avoid God’s call, gets on a ship and is thrown overboard after God sends a storm. Jonah ends up being swallowed by a big fish.

Later, after the fish spits him out onto dry land, God persists and Jonah goes to Nineveh, but with lots of complaining. But maybe the people of Nineveh will ignore him and God will destroy them. Jonah goes into the city and tells the people that God will punish them in forty days – it’s the shortest sermon on record! It’s a warning of what will happen. But when they hear, they repent.

Even the king proclaims that the people should repent! Remember how we've been talking about leadership? Here's another good example. The king tells the people to turn to God with the hope that God will be gracious. And God is!

Though we may only think of Jonah and the big fish, there's a bigger lesson here. Jonah is ready to write the people of Nineveh off. He doesn't care about them or what they do. But God does, and God chooses to be gracious and forgiving – much to Jonah's dismay.

But haven't we been there before? I've said to God, "Let them have it! They deserve it!" One writer said, "I used to like Jonah a lot more before I started to see traces of myself and my actions reflected in him." Another said, "Jonah embodies our own grudges."

Friends, God's ways are not our ways. And the people of Nineveh showed faith in God who could be gracious. They saw possibility and hoped for something even in a time when hope seemed lost.

This is a lesson in grace that pushes us to see God in a way that might be challenging for us. For some of us, it's hard to embrace the thought just as it was for Jonah. Grace is something we don't deserve. It's love that we don't earn. It's truly unconditional. It's no strings attached. It's giving second, third, and twentieth chances. Grace is a challenge, to say the least. And the bottom line is that God is gracious - much more gracious than you or I seek to be most of the time. What if we have to share God's love with people and in places where we'd rather not go?

Jonah's encounter with God is pretty messy. The story makes us question what we believe and how we behave. But that's really the power of God's Word, isn't it? So many times, God's Word confronts us with what we believe to be true and makes us re-think.

In the time when Jonah was written, there was a religious revival in Jerusalem. Part of the revival was a ban on marriage between Jews and non-Jews. So non-Jewish wives and children were banished from the community. The Book of Jonah is a reaction to Israel's poor treatment of people and a reminder of God's love for all people – even the ones who "aren't like us."

Perhaps the Israelites struggled to understand that though they were God's chosen people, God still cared about the rest of the world. Israel was called to be a light to the nations, but their attitudes didn't always reflect the character of God. And so it is today, we claim the name "Christian" and don't always reflect the character of God through Jesus Christ.

In the Book of Jonah, we face the changes that happen when we truly hear God's call in our lives. It's not just doing what God calls us to do. It's also about changing our

own values and beliefs because of God's Word taking root in us—we have to re-examine ourselves over and over again, daily, as we follow Christ.

The story of Jonah goes back to the statement from that E-mail. There's no place that God isn't – even though we may think that there is. Jonah was convinced that the people of Nineveh were a hopeless case. He was reluctant to go to them – even stubborn. These people weren't the chosen ones – and as far as he was concerned, they stood outside of God's grace. *Why would God care about them? Why should God care?* Jonah tried his best to get out of having to go and be a prophet of God's Word. But God's persistence is stronger than anything we can try to outdo. God is persistent in calling us back to a right relationship. God is persistent in loving us. God is persistent in calling us to do something.

Where are the places that we'd call God-forsaken? Who are the people we're just sure that God doesn't associate with? We all have them—places or groups or people that are, in our minds, way beyond the reach of God's love. But what if we really believe that? What are we saying about God if we make the rules and don't allow God to make the rules?

Friends, God calls us to stop trying to make boxes for God to fit in. God works as God will—we don't know where God will show up next, and we'd best not try to figure it out. We don't know the fullness of God's will. I read this about Jonah: *"God's compassion is so great and unwavering that we, like Jonah, struggle to believe it. We wince at the prospect of having to imitate it, particularly when we need to demonstrate it to certain people.*

Perhaps you have felt at odds with what God has asked you to do, and so you've offered a stiff handshake or a fake smile. You've kept people at a distance whom God would have you love. Let God penetrate the areas of your life in which you barely cooperate or even resist."

Friends, remember how much God loves you – how warmly God embraces you. Remember how freely God gives to you and me, even before we ask. The challenge of Jonah is that we face the struggle to share the depth of God's love for others, and it reminds us that we have trouble truly accepting God's grace even for ourselves! Who follows God more closely here - the prophet or the people of Nineveh?

God cares about all people – you, me, even the ones we struggle to care about! Our unwillingness to embrace God's attitude of grace is just as much sin as what we hate to see around us. Jonah reminds us that sometimes the outsider is more open to God than the insider. God cares, even when we don't – that means we have to change, too! God loves, even when we don't - that means we have to keep on growing in love.

I remember a prayer offered by Pastor Joseph Lowery a few years ago. He reminded me that too often our perspective is limited. He prayed: *“But because we know you got the whole world in your hands, we pray for not only our nation, but for the community of nations...Help us to turn to each other and not on each other...And now, Lord, in the complex arena of human relations, help us to make choices on the side of love, not hate; on the side of inclusion, not exclusion; tolerance, not intolerance.”*

Jonah touches that place in us that’s hard to admit. It’s a story of grace – just like Jonah’s struggle to understand the depth of God’s love for all of us. When we consider our call to be the church, we also hear God’s call to welcome and embrace those who are seeking God, too. Andy Stanley says, “The church should be a family expecting guests.”

When we assume that God is our own personal possession, we’ve missed the mark of faith. We forget that God is in the unexpected. Jonah was convinced that the people of Nineveh weren’t the type to listen to God – or even the type that God should care about. But then again, that’s how God works. God comes in Jesus - not the Messiah-type, and his ministry of being with the outsiders wasn’t what anyone expected.

Maybe you’ve found God in an unexpected situation – in a person you were convinced could never change or come to faith. But God is in the business of changing people. God’s work is to extend love and mercy far beyond where we extend them. And God calls us to witness to how we know God’s love and mercy to show the world God who cares enough to offer forgiveness and most of all, grace.

So may God give us the strength, when someone says, “Show me where God is,” to say: “Show me where God isn’t.” May God persist in telling us to share grace widely.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!