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The Patience and Generosity of God

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon about the patience and generosity of God. It is based on this morning's story about Jonah.

If someone has done you wrong, it is natural to hope for justice. Think of the poor widow in our Lord's parable about the "unjust judge." The man "feared not God, nor regarded man" (Luke 18:2, KJV). Meanwhile, a widow appeals to him for help against her adversary. I imagine her to have a small plot of ground for a garden. It is just a bit of land, maybe lying along the alley between her hut and the house across the way. It is just a wee bit of land, but she manages to eke out a living from the vegetables she grows on it. But now, the wealthy man in the house across the alley has taken over her land and has claimed it for his own purposes. He speaks of surveys and ancient privileges and he is stronger than she is in every way. So, he takes the land. The poor woman has been treated unjustly and there is no help for her in the ordinary ways of this earth unless she can rouse the unjust judge to deliver his verdict. How satisfying it will be for this poor woman if the judge does at last render judgment and is able to vindicate her!

When someone has done you wrong, it is natural to hope and pray for justice. If someone has betrayed your trust, stolen years from you, ruined your finances or your reputation, it is natural to be angry and indignant and to hope that the one who has done you wrong gets his or her comeuppance.

Now, here is the interesting thing about God. I am fully persuaded by the Bible that our God is just as angry as you are about injustice. He is as indignant about wrong as you are, indeed even more so. His great heart feels your wrong with divine reverberations and sorrow and anger that exceed anything we humans can manage. And this is an important fact that anyone should keep in mind if they are contemplating wrongdoing. There is a God, and the wrongdoer is definitely playing with fire when he or she does wrong – indeed a fire that might well burn in hell for eternity.

And yet, there is a complexity in the heart of God, such that he can be angry to the depths of hell and yet stand ready to forgive at the same time. That's because alongside his indignation, there is also a yearning for us, that we should be saved. The heart of God is radiant with both righteous indignation *and* love for the sinner. He longs for the sinner to repent and mend his ways, mend her ways. That's what this sermon is about: the patience and generosity of God.

JONAH

My opening text is the angry prayer of Jonah. The man is offended because Nineveh has repented and turned from its evil ways, with the result that the Lord has spared the city. This mercy of the Lord displeased Jonah very much:

²And he prayed to the LORD and said, “I pray thee, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. ³Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Such a prayer and such a set to the soul is a very dangerous game to play. In fact, Jonah is in more danger now than he was when he lay in the great fish in the depths of the sea. ¹ At least then, in the belly of the fish, Jonah was praying a prayer worth praying. He was pleading for God’s mercy. Imagine that watery prayer:

¹Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, ²saying, “I called to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and thou didst hear my voice. ³For thou didst cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood was round about me; all thy waves and thy billows passed over me...⁵The waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me; weeds were wrapped about my head...yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O LORD my God. ⁷When my soul fainted within me, I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to thee, into thy holy temple. (Jonah 2:1-7, RSV)

Jonah had prayed for God’s mercy, for his plight was desperate and his yearning for life was great. Likewise, the Ninevites hoped to live! They did not want to die. Who does? They had been living their lives with that strange mixture of good and evil so characteristic of our race. The days had passed in their regular way, the years had rolled on, and then suddenly Jonah had appeared in their midst preaching the news of their damnation. There is no kindness in his preaching, no words of hope, no call to repentance. He simply spoke of coming disaster:

¹ Cary, Phillip (2008-10-15). *Jonah* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible) (Kindle Locations 2808-2815). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. (Jonah 3:4, KJV)

There is no sweetness here, no call to repentance and amendment of life along with the hope of forgiveness. It is a simple flat-out proclamation of damnation, with no encouragement to repent. Yet the Ninevites repented anyway.

So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. (Jonah 3:5, KJV)

To use the marvelous words of Chrysostom, they “changed not their habitations, but their habits.”² That is, when Jonah preached the looming judgment of the Lord against their town, the people did not flee their town, like Lot and his family fleeing from that doomed town Sodom, but rather they changed “their habits.” They changed their way of life. They turned from their evil and mended their ways. They had no assurance that such steps would save them. At best they could say, “perhaps.” The king expresses this hope:

Who knows, God may yet repent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we perish not? (Jonah 3:9, RSV)

So, they had no promise that their repentance would save their lives, but they repented anyway, and it did indeed save their lives. The Lord repented of the evil he had planned against Nineveh and he did not do it.

And this is what makes Jonah furious. I suppose there are two reasons for his anger. First, he does not *like* the Ninevites. In this, he was not unusual. Nineveh was the capitol city of the grim Assyrian empire, hated the world over. The Assyrians were the enemies of Israel. They were awful, bitter enemies who inflicted much suffering upon the world. So, Jonah dislikes them. Now, that ought not to make a difference to the minister of the Lord. Whether or not the minister likes someone, he or she should always hope and pray for their salvation. But Jonah seems to dislike Nineveh so much that he does not pray for their salvation. In fact, it makes him mad to think of them being saved.

But there seems to be another reason for Jonah's anger, a personal reason concerning his ego. Jonah seems to feel that he has been made to look a fool. He blames the Lord for this:

I pray thee, LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for

² This is by my memory. I do not remember the actual reference.

I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil.
(Jonah 4:2, RSV)

Jonah claims that he had sensed this shipwreck coming. He had anticipated that the Lord would not follow through on his threats. And now that the Lord has indeed repented of the evil he had planned for Nineveh, Jonah feels manipulated and humiliated. He is so mad about this that he prays that the Lord should simply let him die:

³Therefore now, O LORD, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live.” (Jonah 4:3, RSV)

With this prayer, I say, Jonah is in deeper trouble than he had been when he rested in the belly of the great fish in the depths of the sea. Jonah is in trouble, and indeed, you and I and the whole world are in trouble if Jonah’s prayer should come true. For what Jonah is asking is that the Lord should change who he is.

THE VERY NATURE OF GOD

Jonah is quite exact about this. He even quotes Israel’s most cherished name of the LORD, but he asks the Lord to *depart* from that name. That good name was revealed to Moses in that dramatic scene about the golden calf. Moses has come down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments engraved on the tables of stone. But when Moses sees his people at the foot of the mountain, he is so furious at their idolatry that he breaks the tables of stone:

And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses’ anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. (Exodus 32:19, KJV)

In spite of his fury, Moses intercedes for Israel. Then the Lord commands Moses to climb up the mountain again. He hides Moses in a cleft of the mountain, passes by, and reveals his name and his nature to Moses:

⁶The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, *a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness*, ⁷keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the

children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7, NRSV)

What Jonah is doing is asking the Lord to disown this part of his nature: he is asking the Lord to abandon his nature as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Beware, Jonah! If the Lord should do that, not only would the Ninevites lose all hope, but so would you. Indeed, so would we all.

A HAPPY SENSE OF "OVERTHROWN"

As it turns out, the Lord had not made Jonah play the part of a fool, for the happy reason that there is an ambiguity in Jonah's assigned message that left room for Nineveh's salvation. That was the word "overthrown":

And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be *overthrown*. (Jonah 3:4, KJV)

Jonah had interpreted that word as meaning "destroyed." Not only had he interpreted the word that way, but he had wanted the word to mean that. But there is another legitimate meaning to the word: It can also mean "converted." That is precisely what happened and what the Lord wanted to happen. Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be *converted*. Jonah did not like that, but the Lord did, for which we can well praise the Lord. For we also conquer our enemies when they are converted and become our friends.

PRAYING FOR OUR ENEMIES

I have often counseled people to pray for their enemies, as Jesus commands:

⁴⁴But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; ⁴⁵That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:44-45, KJV)

So, I have counseled people to pray for their enemies, but I have added in the note that Jesus does not say, "Have no enemies," but simply, "pray for them." I admire the heart of people who desire the high road of having no enemies, but I wonder whether this is healthy or wise. If we imagine we have no enemies in this world, then we may fail to be on guard, which could mean harm both to us and to our families and various responsibilities in life. Christians should never be afraid of

the truth, and sometimes, alas, the truth is that there are people out there who mean us harm. They are our enemies. So, I hesitate to call people to so high a spirituality that they conduct themselves as if they have no enemies.

No, I prefer to abide by the command of Jesus who asks us to *pray* for our enemies. And what I want to urge especially is that praying for our enemies is no lightweight thing, but rather goes to the very heart of peace and the chance for reconciliation.

The heart of a prayer for anyone is that that one should become more Christlike. Whether I pray for myself, my sons, or my worst enemy, I am always praying that they and I shall become more like Christ. Oh! That is such a good prayer! I yearn for its fulfillment. I believe that it will be fulfilled in God's Kingdom, when the Word of God — that is our Lord Jesus Christ — fills every heart. But when I pray for my enemy I also hope for the *immediate* fulfillment of that prayer. For that would be sweet! To suddenly find my worst enemy standing before me, so changed that my enemy now resembles Jesus himself, that would be great! And we should pray most earnestly for that.

But the thing about Jonah is that he did not pray for that. He could not bring himself to pray for the people of Nineveh. He could preach against them, announcing disaster, but he did not pray *for* them. And when the Lord converted and saved them, Jonah resented their salvation deeply.

THE OPEN QUESTIONS

The story of Jonah and today's story of the Workers in the Vineyard end with rhetorical questions. They are moving questions, almost as if the LORD is asking us whether we think *he* is on the right track. So, the very last verse in Jonah goes this way:

¹¹And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Likewise the owner of the vineyard asks the question:

¹⁵Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? (Matthew 20:15, RSV)

Let's not do that. Let God be God. Let him be generous, even to our enemies. With our prayers, with our willingness to show mercy, with our slowness of anger, with the conduct of our lives, let us not begrudge the generosity of our Lord, for in the end, we entirely depend on his generosity, even the grace and merits of our

Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit
now and forever. Amen.