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Reckless Love: Jonah
His Pouting
Jonah 4:5-11

Today we end our journey with Jonah. God called Jonah to preach to the wicked people of Nineveh. Jonah was not interested. He tried to run away, but God stopped him with a great storm, saved him with a great fish, and sent him to a great city with a second chance. This time Jonah obeyed. He preached a short message to the people of Nineveh: "God is going to wipe you out." And amazingly, they believed his message and repented, hoping that God might change his mind. Even more amazingly, God did.

Jonah's preaching saved the lives of 120,000 people. And how did he feel about that? 4:1: "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry!" Jonah throws a temper tantrum, complaining that God would spare such awful people. As far as Jonah was concerned, they DESERVED to be destroyed and he was ticked that God didn't do it! So ticked, in fact, that he wants God to kill him; he would rather die than to live this upset. God listens patiently and then asks a penetrating question: "Do you do well to be angry?" In other words, do you REALLY have the right to tell me how to do my job?

You might think that Jonah would dial it down a notch or two then. Obviously, God isn't impressed with his tantrum. Maybe he should take a deep breath...and have a more reasoned conversation with the Lord. But no; Jonah's on a tirade. Listen:

Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint.

And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Jonah is not done pouting. He stomps out of the city, heads for a hillside, builds himself a little cabana, and sits down to pout. And to do something else. What? He waits to see "what would become of the city." You realize what this means, right? Jonah is STILL hoping (fingers crossed) that God will change his mind and destroy the city after all. Jonah wants a ringside seat to the apocalypse...JUST IN CASE he gets his wish.

I've never been to a NASCAR race. But I'm told that ONE of the reasons that 80,000 people pack out the Talladega Speedway is to see a wreck. Some of the spectators endure crowds and noise and sun because they are hoping for a good crash.

So is Jonah. He's hoping for Nineveh to crash and burn. Why? Probably two reasons. He thinks their repentance was too easy...and he thinks it won't last. These wicked people have committed awful atrocities. They DESERVE God's judgment. For them to now say, "We're sorry..."...and have the slate wiped clean...that's just not right. Not fair. Not enough. They NEED to suffer for what they have done. AND...Jonah is sure they will reoffend; they'll go right back out and do the same awful things again!

I was watching a special on Ted Bundy the other day. Bundy was the guy, born in Tacoma, who admitted to killing more than 30 women and girls...and was believed to have been responsible for as many as 50 deaths. On the day of his execution in 1989, he had an interview with James Dobson in which he reported that he had given his life to Christ in prison and asked for his forgiveness for the evil that he had done.

When you hear that, what do you think? Do you say, "Isn't it wonderful that he was reconciled to God before he died; that he was forgiven for all the horrible things he did?" OR...do you think, "Yeah...I BET he gave his life to Christ. Probably just one more manipulation. Anyway, he doesn't DESERVE forgiveness. He deserves to burn in hell for what he did to those girls."

If you struggle with YOUR answer, then you understand what Jonah felt as he sat on that hill. He COULD have felt pleased that God would use him to bring about the repentance of 120,000 people. Instead, he is MAD that God used his preaching that way...and he is sitting in the bleachers hoping God changes his mind in a spectacularly destructive way.

While he's sitting there, pouting, God tries to start another conversation with him using a plant as a parable. This is a plant in our neighbor's yard. The husband's not so keen on it but the wife loves it... and that settles it. (Husbands, can I have an amen?) It towers impressively over their front yard with those huge, elephant ear leaves.

The area around Nineveh was barren. Even though Jonah built a little rock shelter, he likely had no branches to make a roof. So God appoints a plant to grow up over Jonah's head to provide shade. And for the first time in the story, we see a smile on Jonah's face. "Jonah was EXCEEDINGLY glad for the plant." But the NEXT day, God appoints a worm to kill the plant and destroy Jonah's shade. AND God appoints a scorching wind to complement the beating sun so that Jonah's on the verge of heatstroke. In 2 verses, he goes from being exceedingly GLAD to suicidal. "It is better for me to die than to live." He said that before! And God's reply is nearly the same, too. "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" Jonah's reply is SO whiny, it made me laugh out loud when I was memorizing it: "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die!"

Why is God doing this? It feels like he's being cruel to Jonah. Like the kid burning ants with a magnifying glass. PIC? But this is a parable. And here's God's punchline: "You care more about a plant... (and really, at the HEART of it...you care more about your own comfort which that plant provided)...than you do about 120,000 people who live in Nineveh. You have pity for a plant. You have pity for yourself. I have pity for people!"

If you've ever wondered where the expression, "not knowing their right hand from their left" came from, here it is! God uses this expression to describe how utterly spiritually lost and confused these people are. God pities them. And Jonah despises them. In fact, again, Jonah expresses suicidal thoughts. He would rather die than deal with a God who is foolishly merciful toward people who do not deserve mercy.

God uses a parable to open Jonah's eyes and, frankly, to shame him for his lack of compassion. So...did it work? WE DON'T KNOW! Why? Because the story just stops! "...should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" Wait a second...that's it? That's how it ends? We turn the page, looking for the rest of the paragraph. But there IS no rest of the paragraph. "...and also much cattle! The End."

It is the most unsatisfying, abrupt cliffhanger in the Bible! We have no idea how Jonah responds to God's parable. Are his eyes suddenly opened? Does he say, "Oh my goodness, NOW I see how selfish I've been! More concerned with my own comfort and MY perspective of what is right and wrong. Utterly indifferent to the fate of 120,000 people. But YOU love them, God. Even in their sin, you love them and want to save them. I see that now." That might have been a good ending!

Or maybe Jonah said, "I don't care about your plant. These people are awful. I don't believe their cheap repentance. It cost them nothing compared to the pain they have caused. And it ONLY happened because they were afraid of dying. It will never last! You wait; when the threat is lifted, they will go back to their old ways."

But it doesn't tell us that, either. We are left...dangling...wondering how Jonah will reply to God's parable of mercy. It is an unsatisfying, unsettling, inconclusive end to the story. "...and also much cattle!"

Here's what makes it even more confusing: Jonah was right! He was DEAD right about the Ninevites. Jonah preached this sermon about 750 B.C. 28 years later, the Assyrians ...these same people...invaded Israel and destroyed the Ten Northern tribes, Jonah's people. Wiped them out! You've heard of the 10 lost tribes of Israel? They weren't lost. They were annihilated. And it was these Assyrians who did the annihilating. One generation later. 30 years after they repented of their evil ways, they returned to their evil ways and wiped out the very kingdom Jonah called home.

So Jonah was right. It appears that God's mercy and compassion were wasted on the Ninevites. And here's something even MORE interesting. The book of Jonah was included in scripture AFTER the Assyrians wiped out the people of Israel. When the ancient scribes pulled together what we know as the Old Testament, they already KNEW the outcome of this story. They knew that the Ninevites' repentance did not last; that they were responsible, in fact, for the greatest catastrophe in the history of the Israelite people. And YET...they included the book of Jonah in our Bible anyhow. WHY? Why, if you knew that God's mercy was WASTED on the Ninevites...why, if you knew that they threw God's grace right back into His face...why would you include this story in your collection of holy scripture?

BECAUSE...it says something about God's nature. About his mercy, his grace, his long-suffering compassion...that he would take SUCH a risk to save SUCH unworthy people. That is why we call this series "Reckless Love." Because God's mercy can seem reckless. Extravagant. Because it seems wasteful to pour out such mercy on such undeserving people. And yet...God's love ...and mercy...and grace...is so extravagant, he is willing to take that risk. It is worth it to him. He won't give up.

And by the way, God didn't give up with Jonah, either. Right? God is JUST as patient with Jonah as he is with the Ninevites. God is obviously in control of the situation. We hear the same word over and over again to describe his sovereignty over Jonah's life: Appoint. God appointed the fish. He appointed the plant. He appointed the worm. He appointed the wind. ALLLLLLL for the purpose of saving Jonah, of reaching Jonah, of changing Jonah's heart. God could easily have said, "To hell with you, Jonah. I'll start over with another prophet." But he appoints fish and plant and worm and wind...and he asks question after question after question...ALL for the purpose of drawing Jonah into his heart. Of helping Jonah see a lost world with the eyes of a loving Creator who would do anything to save that world that he pitied.

In fact...notice that word "pity." When God says, "I 'pity' Nineveh, that great city,"... that word literally means to "take action with tears flowing down your cheeks." God was taking upon himself the sin and rebellion and pain that the Ninevites were causing. He was not waiting for them to turn to him. He reached out...he took action...with tears of compassion flowing down his cheeks...that he might save these pathetic souls who did not know their right hand from their left.

And that was only the start. When Jesus came to earth on his rescue mission, he looked out over Jerusalem PIC and WEPT for the city because they did not recognize the salvation being offered to them. HIS salvation. Still, he took action. He went to the cross. He was willing to be WASTEFUL...EXTRAVAGANT...RECKLESS in pouring out his own lifeblood...in hope that some might be saved.

The apostle Peter, writing centuries later, spoke of this reckless love of God: The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. II Pet 3.9 The punchline of Jonah is that God WANTS to save people who do not deserve saving...and he wants to use us to accomplish that work of salvation. Even jerks like Jonah. Even jerks like us. And we need to decide whether we will pout and lament the discomfort it causes us...or whether we will finally soften our hearts... so that we might pity the lost as God pities the lost. As God pitied us!

Did Jonah ever soften? Did HE ever repent? The book doesn't tell us. But there IS one historical clue. Remember this? Jonah's tomb in Mosul, Iraq, sitting on ancient Nineveh. Jonah was buried in Nineveh. Think about it: the only way Jonah would be buried in Nineveh is how? If he STAYED in Nineveh! Why didn't he run back to Israel as fast as he could once God was done with him? Well...maybe God's parable changed Jonah's mind! Maybe Jonah repented. Maybe Jonah came to love the people he once hated. Why else would he remain in that city until his death?

I cling to that little hope. I want to believe that finally, petulant, pouting Jonah had a true change of heart. That he came to see the lost Ninevites with the compassionate, tear-filled eyes of his heavenly father; that he came to love them. And I believe this book closes with a cliffhanger because it poses a question to every one of us. Will WE...as individuals...as a church...will WE have that SAME compassionate, reckless, tear-stained love for the lost people around us?

Next week, St. Andrews weekend, I begin a new series called, "Your Welcome." If God is stirring your heart for the lost, I am going to give you some practical ways to welcome them into your life. Dig out your ugliest tartan outfits, show up in here Saturday night if you are Seahawks fans, and let's see what God wants to do in our midst!