

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

**Reading for Revised Common Lectionary –Pentecost 15
Jonah 3:10--4:11, Matthew 20:1-16**

**13 September 2020
Salem, Bridgeport**

“The Gripping Grasp of Grace”

Jeanette:

Wow. Where do we begin? Where do we begin talking about the “gripping grasp of grace”? Where do we begin to see God’s hand in these 2 scriptures?

You know, I look at Jonah, and after hearing his story I think to myself, “I think I would like to be one of the Ninevites. I think I would like to be one of them.”

Why?

Although Jonah was a prophet called of God, first of all, he ran from what God had asked him to do, on that winding way to obedience which I think I sometimes find myself on, hearing God’s voice saying, “Okay, Jeanette, here’s what you should do.” And I’m like, “Uh...I don’t think I want to do that. Let somebody else do it. God, are you sure you’re talking to me? Is that what you want me to do? And I go through this whole long list of things and God is like, “Okay, whenever you’re ready, I’m still here.”

So I look at Jonah, having a mandate from God to go and rescue God’s people, and Jonah knew how gracious God was and he’s like, “I ain’t gonna do it. I’m not. Because God, I know if I go preach to them, they’re going to repent, so I’m going to have wasted that trip for nothing. I’m not even going to get any miles on that. I’m not going.” So in his stubbornness, in his rebellion, in his acting like I act many times, and probably, possibly acting as many of us, like “I’m not going to do it.” And yet God’s grace is still winding through the story.

Do I want to be like the Ninevites? I don’t know what they were doing prior to their repentance, but for me I know that’s the essence of what I need to do. I know I need to respond to God’s loving hand, saying, “Jeanette, you know that wasn’t right. You know you shouldn’t have done that. You know you shouldn’t have said that. Then I go down the list of things that I know according to God’s Word that shouldn’t be allowed as part of my day to day, and yet, in my rebellion, in my stubbornness, in my saying, “Okay, God, not now,” his mercy and his grace continue to flow to me. His grace continues to allow me to be part of this life, continues to allow me to come and worship, continues to allow me to greet each of you, continues to allow me to try to be all that he has called me to be. That hand of grace, that gripping grasp that is not squeezing the life out of me, but holding my tightly yet gently, that’s the hand of grace from God, the one who loves me.

Pastor Marjo:

You were talking about how we don’t always do what God calls us to do, and I know when I find myself doing those things, of course I go to God for forgiveness. I rely on God’s grace.

But the thing is, there are people out there – they’re not named “Nineveh” – but there are whole groups of people that I really don’t think deserve God’s grace, and that’s when I know it’s not only what I do, but what I think, and what I feel in my heart, that needs to be forgiven. And particularly where we are in our society today, no matter what you believe, or what you want to see happen, we’re so polarized, that we tend to look at people on the “other” side – no matter what side we’re on – and think, “Those are the bad people. We’re the ones who are right. We’re the ones who deserve God’s grace. And they don’t.”

So I can really relate to Jonah. Because I would be rather be right, I think, than to do what God wants me to – which is act in love. Now that doesn’t mean we don’t call people to repent, which is what Jonah did. It doesn’t mean that we don’t work for justice. But I think what both the stories say to me is that there is something in me, something for which I need to repent, and that’s my self-centeredness, and my feeling that I’m the one who’s right, and I’m the one who needs to make all the rules and get everyone to agree with me.

Jeanette:

And that's again where God's grace extends to each one of us. You know, one of the things in the scripture of Jonah, before we take a visit to the gospel, is that he found himself grumbling. And how often do I find myself in situations that I don't like, and then there's this murmuring going on in my head. I may not voice it. You may not hear it. But going on in my mind is, "God, why? What do you think you're doing? What do YOU think you're doing?" (*laughing*) I have a lot of nerve! Someone wrote a play that said, "You're arm is too short to box with God". And I think, "OK, God, again, here I am, needing you to have mercy and forgive me. I think with this particular pandemic, it seems like it's a whale that has swallowed us up, a huge fish which has swallowed us all up, and I wonder how much grumbling and complaining we were doing prior to that, and I wonder how much we're doing now. (*laughing*) But I think either way it leads us to say, "God, have mercy on us. Have mercy on us. Deliver us. Bring us out of this."

And I think like right now as we're sitting here in the coolness of the day we can begin to say, "Okay, God, I'm going to thank you for the duration, I'm going to stop saying, "I don't like it", I'm going to stop saying, "I hate this", I'm going to change what I say, and I'm going to say, "God, thank you! I don't particularly like this, God, but I'm going to give you praise anyhow." I'm just going to say, "God, I'm in the midst of this and you are here with me so I'm going to say thank you. I'm going to say, "Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" until things change, until things get better. I'm going to just change.

So when we look at that gospel, how many of you think that's a little unfair what that landowner did? Yeh, kind of like, "Wait a minute: I've been working ALL day? And you're not giving me any MORE? That person who just walked in the door and worked for an hour and you're giving him the same as me? What's up with that?" I think when I look at that particular scripture I think again how I in myself will look and say, "God, that is not right. This isn't right. That's wrong. That's wrong." And God is like, "Who are you? Who died and left you in charge?!"

I am the one – and in my mind I'm thinking that I don't know the backstory. I don't know what happened to those other workers in scripture as to why they weren't following the other people when they were going to work. I don't know why. I don't know why some people will come to church and others will not. I don't know why some people will lift their hands in worship and others will not. I don't know why some people love God's word and others do not. But all I do know is that God's grace is extending to them just as much as it is extending to me.

Pastor Marjo:

And sometimes that grace comes in ways that we don't even recognize. Some of the things we're grumbling and complaining about. I'm thinking about Jonah again, because I'm thinking about the fact that when he was thrown overboard, he could have drowned, right? But what happened? There was a fish, a huge fish that swallowed him up. I think what that represents is that God already knew that he was going to be thrown overboard. God already knew that. And God had prepared something to save Jonah. And somehow, no matter whether Jonah was going backwards or forwards, the right way or the opposite way, God was able to move him. The whole time Jonah is grumbling and complaining and yet the whole time God is working in Jonah's life. And so what I recognize in myself is that even when I'm grumbling and complaining, and even when I'm not doing the things I'm supposed to do, God is at work in my life and also in other people's lives as well. And so even the people who we're grumbling and complaining about? God is working in them, too. We're all Jonah. We're all probably going in the opposite direction much of the time. But the grace is that God is working even then to get us to where God wants us to be. That's what I hang my hopes on. That's where I put my faith.

Jeanette:

Amen!

Pastor Marjo:

Amen!