



Grace Can Be a Problem

TEXT
Jonah 3:1–4:3

September 30, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I will confess to you, on weeks like this one, I sometimes wish God had called me to be something other than a preacher. You also might sometimes wish that God had called me to be something other than a preacher. Sometimes I don't want to be the one to remind you and me that, no matter what happens, God expects us to walk through it not only understanding, but also standing under the word God speaks to us. I know that is what God expects, but what do you think God is saying to us now? What is God's word for us today?

Let me tell you some of how I see our faith intersecting with all we have witnessed this week.

I'll begin with Monday. I was on a plane, flying both literally and figuratively, because I had participated in Rev. Jenny McDevitt's installation at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. It was a wonderful celebration. Jenny honored me with an invitation to preach in her service. She also invited Rev. Meg Peery McLaughlin to provide the charge to the pastor. Both of them asked me to bring you greetings. They are doing great, but they miss you.

On the way home, I read Rev. Hallie Hottle's sermon

from last Sunday. She is a very fine preacher. As I said in my enote on Friday, I am aware of how blessed we have been and continue to be by the faithful ministry of these women.

I also, at 28,000 feet, read Jonah again. At times I laughed out loud. The woman next to me knew I was reading the Bible, and I think she was offended that I was laughing. But guys, this is a funny story. I mean the fish isn't even the funniest part.

The word of God comes to Jonah a second time. And this time, with the fish still fresh in his mind, Jonah decides to carry this word to Nineveh. Jonah obeys, but he is still reluctant.

Jonah preaches, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" That's it. Isaiah requires 66 chapters. Jeremiah needs 52 chapters — Ezekiel about the same. But Jonah just needs eight words. And unlike the other prophets, people respond to Jonah. It's almost comical.

Not only the folks around Jonah, but the king and the nobles repent. And then it gets ridiculous as even the animals join in the act of repentance, fasting and wearing sackcloth. Be grateful it was not your job to fit oxen with sackcloth. Jonah speaks

eight words and the whole town comes singing: "I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see."

As prophets go, Jonah should be in the hall of fame. But there is more. It seems to me, Jonah finds himself in Nineveh not just because the Assyrians — those enemies of Israel — needed to hear this word from God, but because Jonah needed to speak it to his enemies. Jonah needed some conversion of his own.

As Jonah feared, the Ninevites repent and God forgives. And when that happens, Jonah throws a temper tantrum. Like a two-year-old who is astonished to discover that he is not always going to get his way, Jonah throws a fit. Now to be fair, with two-year-olds, sometimes even a tantrum can be cute — if it is someone else's two-year-old. But Jonah is a full-grown man. It's not cute. Jonah berates God. "I knew you would do this. This is the very reason I went to Tarshish ... because you are nothing but merciful and gracious and I can't stand that about you. Just kill me now."

What? Isn't grace a good thing? Don't we want God to be gracious? Evidently Jonah does not. For Jonah, this grace is a problem. But why?

If I understand the text, it is because Jonah knows when the word of God comes to you. It comes not just as information or even inspiration, but as a claiming word. It is a word that comes to you because you belong to God, and God refuses to let go of you.

And Jonah is mad because that same claiming word of grace that came to him has now come to his enemy.

Here's what I think Jonah's problem is. Until this point, Jonah could tell himself that he was different. He could tell himself that he was better than them. He thought he was more important to God than they were.

Jonah has lived like relationship to God is an Olympic sport; and compared to them, he has medaled, and they have been disqualified. But it's obvious that in the eyes of God, that distinction is not really there. Jonah is troubled not because grace has come to those he deemed unworthy, but because he realizes that no one is worthy of God's grace. The evil Ninevites are not completely evil, and more shattering, Jonah is not as righteous as he would like to believe. He's not more important; he's just been arrogant. Arrogance is always a spiritual problem.

I think every one of us has moments, faces circumstances where our self-perception is that I am somehow more important than you. It shapes how we see the world. I think that is a dangerous circumstance.

My junior year in high school we did the musical *West Side Story*. I was cast as the leader

of the Jets. What was his name? Biff, Rif, Poof? I can't remember. I do remember that I had to dance. I had lines to learn. I had to sing: "Get cool, boy." I even had to die on stage. I was very dramatic.

The audience loved the play. It had been a good show. The audience showed their approval. And when I came out for my bow, they thundered. Perhaps the building wasn't really shaking, but that's how I remember it. They loved me.

The next day, I walked through the halls of Lakeside High School just a little bit slower. I had just a little swagger in my walk. And the little people, the ninth-graders, would come up: "Was that you? Were you the one on stage last night?"

I'd say, "Yeah."

"You were so great, man."

I'd say, "Well."

For about three days, I convinced myself I was great. I walked among the ordinary folks of modest talent, and like Fred Craddock would say, had to hold on to the shrubbery just to keep from ascending. The temptation to think that I am better than someone, that I am better than you, is seductive.

So, does this have anything to do with what we have witnessed this week? Let me tell you where my mind and heart have gone this week.

Sometimes we witness something in the political world that touches a nerve in our country. It touches something real that has nothing to do with politics. We have witnessed that this week. In Washington, there is the politi-

cal work of the Court's makeup that has touched a nerve that has nothing to do with politics. As a pastor, I have been thinking less of Washington and more about you. In particular, I have been thinking about those of you who have had to relive incidents of abuse or assault.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that approximately one in three women and one in six men in this country have an experience of sexual assault or rape. That means this is a "disease" we have not controlled at all. It also means that a lot of us in this room have had to deal with this situation.

One fall day when I was in the ninth grade, Richard Baker¹ got off the bus at my stop. It wasn't his normal stop. I was a bean-pole kid, weighing just over 100 pounds — and a lot of that was braces. He was two years older and probably 30 pounds larger, and a lot of that was his long hair. He pushed me down in a neighbor's yard, and he beat me black and blue. I remember what happened on the bus the day before that made him angry. I remember trying to get away, and not being able to escape his fists; he was just too big. I remember the next day and every day after that, trying to get through the school day without going into the bathroom because he threatened to find me in there and beat me up again. I was scared.

Now let me be clear. I am not traumatized by this experience of violence in my childhood. It does not haunt me, and it certainly wasn't sexual violence in any

fashion. But I remember it. I remember that feeling of not being safe. So, in a small way, I can imagine those of you who have experienced sexual violence have likely had those memories rise up and haunt you again this week, lifting up again the feelings of being degraded and unsafe. Sexual assault hotlines have experienced a dramatic increase this week, and it is no wonder.

This is about more than Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh. This is about us, about our culture. Some have said that this is about “who you believe.” But there is a more important question, and that prior, more significant question is, “Does it matter?”

I think, for far too long, the abuse of women, as well as men, in this country has been deemed “just the way things are.” It’s too bad, but it’s not that big of a deal. Unfortunate things happen, but we shouldn’t dwell on them. And those who suffer from the incidents, and in some cases from patterns of abuse, have been blamed and shamed and often completely ignored. They have been left to assume, “No one will believe me, and even if they do, it doesn’t matter to them.” That is the same as our saying, “*They* don’t matter.”

And we don’t want to think of it this way, but I think the reason this is the case — the reason we have acted like that story doesn’t matter — is arrogance. The temptation to diminish the pain of another is just one step away from saying, “You are not as important as me.” That is a spiritual problem.

And I am afraid that I have contributed to that problem — because as a preacher, I haven’t wanted to talk about this. It struck me as unseemly to talk about sexual assault in church.

But I was wrong. What’s unseemly is to know that there are brothers and sisters in our church family who have carried these burdens of pain, and our silence has suggested that you need to carry that by yourself. We don’t care. That must change.

If this is your story, you are not alone. For the word of God comes to you. And the word of God comes not just as information, but as a word of grace that claims you as God’s child. You are not defined by the worst moment in your life, but by the love of God that will never let you go.

If your story is one of assault, you can talk to us, and we will listen to you. You can tell us your story, and we will pray with you, and we will believe you.

For too long, America has said this kind of pain doesn’t matter. Even if we believe you, it doesn’t really matter. But I think the word of God has come to us, and I think that arrogance is changing. I want to be part of that change, and I bet you do too.

I’ll tell you something Jonah never figured out. The grace of God is not something for which we compete. And our striving to determine who is worthy and who is unworthy, our temptation to assume we are more important than, I don’t know — anyone. That’s not a holy perspective — because everyone is a child of God. That is not a status of the worthy or the righteous. Ev-

eryone is a child of God. We are God’s children — not because we are better, but because we are loved.

And when it comes to God’s children, she will speak a gracious claiming word again and again and again and again, until it sticks. And when it sticks, we will not be disturbed by the vast reach of God’s grace — no, no, no. That extravagant love is something we will celebrate.

¹This is not his real name, but he is a real guy.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.