

CAN YOU AT LEAST FEEL PITY FOR A COW ?

A sermon on Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-16

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

Both of our scripture readings this morning deal with the same central tension:

God's heart is a lot bigger than our own.

And there's the same challenge:

Can we accept that God's love and mercy extend to those who haven't "earned it"?

We'd better or we're all in trouble, because I don't know about you,

but I don't think I've earned all the mercy that God has shown me.

God is good.

And that can sometimes be a problem for us.

Jonah's problem is not that God's warning failed.

It may seem that way.

Jonah prophesied that the city of Nineveh would be overturned.

He waited and watched, ... and nothing happened.

No, God's warning did not fail.

It succeeded. It succeeded spectacularly.

Nineveh repented and turned from their evil ways.

And so God also relented.

And Jonah is furious.

Um...God,



*where's that
fire and brimstone
you promised?*

But not because God has become unpredictable or unjust.

In fact, Jonah's anger comes from knowing God's character.

He says, quoting Psalm 86 (among other places in the Bible):

"I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love."

Jonah knows who God is, and Jonah knows that God can even be *too merciful*.

His theology is perfectly correct. But his heart ... well, that's another story.



For an eighth-century BC Israelite like Jonah,

Nineveh was not an abstract city full of hypothetical sinners.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire,

the great imperial power that represented an existential threat to Israel and its neighbors.

CAN YOU AT LEAST FEEL PITY FOR A COW ?



They were widely known as a fearsome and warlike people.
If Assyria decides to conquer you, your options,
not that you actually got to choose, were death or slavery.
So Jonah's anger is understandable;
he probably even *thinks* it is righteous anger.



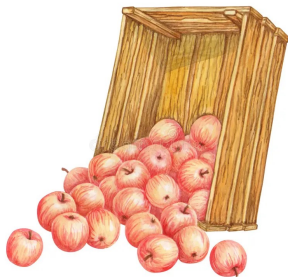
These aren't merely “people who have made some mistakes.”
They represent the empire whose violence and domination was infamous in the region.
Which means Jonah's anger has something important going for it:
There is a genuine moral grievance underneath it.
But God's question isn't, “Were the Ninevites innocent?”
They weren't.
The question is what can be done about it.
There are times when our anger seems justified,
but the way we want God to resolve the problem reveals
that our hearts are not yet aligned with His.

Jonah wants justice — that's a good thing — but he has confused justice with vengeance.
Biblically, justice isn't simply “making sure someone gets punished.”
Justice is about setting things right—putting things back into proper order.



Nineveh's proper vocation as human beings is not wickedness.

Their proper function is to live as creatures made by God,
in His own image, doing what is good.
So when Nineveh turns from its evil ways, something has actually happened.
They have been turned around.
They have been put back on the right path.
And therefore, in a very real sense,
Nineveh *was overturned* exactly as Jonah proclaimed.
Just not in the way Jonah wanted.



Jonah wanted God to overturn the city.
God wanted to overturn people's hearts.
God's objective was never simply to change Nineveh's legal status from “guilty” to “not guilty.”
God wants their lives turned around.

CAN YOU AT LEAST FEEL PITY FOR A COW ?

Hang on to this idea, it becomes important when we get to the vineyard.



Repentance isn't merely changing God's paperwork,
some cosmic naughty or nice list.
The Ninevites don't merely say the correct words.
They fast. They put on sackcloth. They call upon God.
But most importantly:
God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways.
That last part matters.
Their repentance is embodied.
They don't merely acquire a new designation.
They begin to live differently.
And God notices, and God rejoices.

In the same way, think about the workers in the Vineyard who arrive at different hours.

They aren't merely recipients of an abstract accounting decision, fudging their hours.
They actually enter the vineyard.
They willingly work, even if it is for but an hour.

There is an interesting parallel here:
Nineveh turns from evil into a different way of living.
The late workers enter the vineyard and actually work.
You see, Grace doesn't mean that what we do doesn't matter.
Rather, Grace brings people back into the work God created them to do.

But what about Jonah?

God cares about Nineveh.
But God also cares about Jonah.
God could simply say, "Jonah, stop being ridiculous."
He could write him off as being hopeless.
Instead, God asks him a question, "Do you do well to be angry?"
God enters into conversation, and pursues Jonah's heart.

God's mercy is not only directed toward the people we think don't deserve it.
God's mercy is also directed toward us when our hearts are not yet capable of rejoicing in it.

CAN YOU AT LEAST FEEL PITY FOR A COW ?

God wants Nineveh reconciled to Himself.
And God wants Jonah reconciled to Himself.
Neither is simply left to their own devices.
God does not respond to disobedience by abandoning the disobedient.



The way God goes about correcting Jonah is curious, even comedic.

Which is interesting, since Jonah seems like he's in a pretty dark place.
Throughout the book of Jonah, this prophet has but one request of God. To die.
Whatever jam he's in, he seems to think the better path is death.

And yet God is able to elicit sympathy from him.

He appoints a plant to grow and shade Jonah from the harsh sun.

And Jonah loves the plant.

But then God appoints a worm and the plant dies.

And Jonah is angry - angry enough to die ... as he so often seems to be.

- Jonah was willing to die instead of obeying God's command in the first place.
- Jonah was willing to die because Nineveh turned to God and lives.
- And now Jonah is willing to die because a plant died.

God asks him, "is it *right* for you to be angry about the plant"

And Jonah says, "yes, it is right."

And this time at least, his anger is born out of care, compassion.

And God draws this out:

You cared about a plant you did not make.

You did not make it grow.

You did not tend it.

You did not sustain it.

You didn't even have it long.

And yet you pitied it.

Jonah successfully has pity for one plant. Glory to God!

God has pity for one hundred and twenty thousand people.

And then comes the oddest phrase:

"...and also much cattle."

You know, I put down a sermon title to put in the bulletin
long before I know where I'm going with the sermon.



CAN YOU AT LEAST FEEL PITY FOR A COW ?

This one, were I to revise it would be “Can You At Least Feel Pity for a Cow?”

[former title was “When Good Guys Grumble”]

There’s a bit of humor here, but it is also true.

Sometimes, it is easier to have compassion on animals than on people.

And God is asking Jonah, can you stretch beyond caring about a plant to caring about the cows?

I’m reminded here of a scene from the Lord of the Rings.

There’s a creature known as Gollum, tricky and false,

a slinking, dectetful character, a murderer, long corrupted the evil Ring.

Frodo comments that it was a *pity*

NOBODY
LIKES
YOU



that his uncle Bilbo hadn’t killed Gollum when he’d had the chance.

But the wise wizard Gandalf explains that

it was *pity* that stayed Bilbo’s hand.

And as the story progresses, we along with Frodo

come to see Gollum as a pitiable creature

who still has a role to play in destroying the Ring,

instead of only as an enemy to be killed.

It is a change in mindset Jonah is struggling with.

Cows are one thing, fictional characters another,

But God even cares about wicked real-life people.

And notice how God speaks about the Ninevites.

One hundred twenty thousand persons, who do not know their right hand from their left.

Now, I’m a bit directionally challenged,

and concepts of left and right aren’t always that easy to grasp.

But that is not what God means here.

This is an idiomatic phrase for not knowing good from evil.

It paints a picture of profound moral ignorance or confusion.

Indeed, the moral compass of the Assyrians

was not one grounded in anything like the Ten Commandments.

They didn’t have the laws of Moses or the words of the prophets, much less the Gospel of Christ.

It was a violent “might makes right” type of world.

They don’t understand the moral situation they’re in.

They’ve always been taught that it is good to get what you want through intimidation and coercion,

so long as you can get away with it.



CAN YOU AT LEAST FEEL PITY FOR A COW ?

God says, in effect, "Look at them. Look how lost they are."

That's a different way of looking at an enemy.

Jonah sees people who deserve judgment.

God sees people who need guidance and yes, mercy.

And he wants to share that vision with Jonah.



The genius of Jonah is that we never hear Jonah's answer.

God asks, "And should I not pity Nineveh...?"

And then the book ends.

That's not an accident.

The question is handed to us.

Can I rejoice when God is merciful to somebody I think has earned judgment?

Jonah cared deeply about a plant that gave him shade.

God cared deeply about a city full of people who were lost.

Jonah cared about the plant because it *benefited* him.

God cared about Nineveh because they *belonged* to Him.

And then, almost as an afterthought, God says: "...and much cattle."

Can you at least feel pity for a cow?



If God can teach Jonah to expand his circle of compassion from a plant to a city,
perhaps he can teach us to see the people around us
with the same mercy with which he sees us.

For God's mercy is restorative, his justice is ordered toward making things right,
and God's work of reconciliation includes transforming hearts
even of people who already belong to him, ... and their cows too.

*Now to the One who by the power at work within us
is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine,
to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*