

Jonah 3:10-4:11 9.17.26 17 Pentecost Bill Uetracht

I have always felt that it is a sad thing that we Christians sometimes are so serious. Our lack of levity has made some of us crabby and others of us judgmental. And what's more, it's caused us not to see humor where humor exists. And in my opinion, it's hard to find a more humorous writing in the Bible than the book of Jonah.

This Old Testament writing was never intended to be viewed as a historical writing. It is a Hebrew short story meant to be "didactic entertainment," which is a fancy way of saying, entertainment that teaches us something. And the entertainment that it provides is intended to make you laugh or at least crack a smile.

You have to crack a smile when you read in the second chapter of Jonah that "Yahweh had arranged that a great fish should be there to swallow Jonah." You think you've had a bad day? How many of you have had God arrange for a big fish to swallow you after you decided to head in the very opposite direction than you were called to go in order to get away from God? (Good luck with that little endeavor.) How many of you have experienced a big fish vomiting you up on the beach? And by the way, the word for the plant that the author of Jonah uses in today's reading is a play on the words for vomit and Jonah. It's as if the author doesn't want you to forget the vomiting scene. It's as if he doesn't want to quit entertaining you.

One of the tools that the book of Jonah uses to entertain us and make us laugh is exaggeration, hyperbole, we often call it. In the third chapter of the book, the author tells us that Nineveh takes three days to traverse. A three-day journey would be at least 90 miles. How many modern cities, much less ancient ones are or were that large? Exaggeration.

When Jonah initiates his preaching gig in Nineveh, he uses five words in Hebrew to get the Assyrians to repent. How many preachers you know who stop after five words? I mean I have a hard time getting my point across in, let's say, 75 words. Jonah speaks five words, and the whole nation repents, including the animals. Jonah tells us that the horses and cows put on sackcloth and ashes. I don't know about you, but I would find it hard to imagine a cow donning herself with burlap. I'm not much of a farm guy, but I think I can speak for most farmers that they haven't witnessed cows or horses dressing themselves.

In today's text, which includes the very end of the book of Jonah, we are told that God feels it is his privilege to have mercy on the 120,000 people of Nineveh who don't know their right hand from their left). First of all, that is a pretty large ancient city. And second, you mean to tell me that they are *all* clueless? They are all immature? They all don't know what they are doing?

And note. The animals are included in God's provision of grace? The book ends not simply with a reference to 120,000 clueless people, but with a mention of animals--"many of them". I don't know if it's just the horses that have put ashes on their foreheads who are the recipients of God's mercy, or if the turkeys, pigs, and platypuses (platypi!) who are too dumb to know how to do that are included as well. I can't say. But I see exaggeration at work.

Exaggeration is a common tool for humorists. Bev and I went to the Dr. Grims Comedy Club Wednesday night to experience nationally known comedian Greg Warren. He is a master at exaggeration, and I absolutely loved his work Wednesday night. I especially appreciated his comedy in relationship to our

preoccupation with our cell phones, our daily step count (10,000 today), and our achievements. (He played first seat first clarinet in the high school band. Isn't he special?!)

Warren's use of exaggeration, of course, made us laugh uproariously, primarily I am convinced because we could see ourselves and our neighbors more clearly. Sometimes until somebody blows something up and makes it larger than life, we fail to see ourselves and life itself as we are and it is. Let's face it. We are addicted to our cell phones, addicted to measuring everything, addicted to feeling good about ourselves over against others.

In today's Jonah's text, the author gives us an exaggerated view of Jonah. After God repents of the evil that he said he was going to do to Nineveh, Jonah becomes inconsolable. "Now you know, God, why I didn't want to do the job that you asked me to do. Now you realize why I went west when you told me to go east. I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment. I knew you wouldn't blast those doggone Ninevites, the enemy of our people. So...let me die. It is better for me to die than to live."

Hearing that once makes you smile a little bit and may cause you to say: "Oh, Jonah, lighten up. You look silly." But Jonah doesn't say this just one time. He says it three times. And the third time occurs after the bush that God had provided for him to keep him cool withers and dies.

I've always found this part of the story to be particularly funny. Jonah goes outside of the city to sulk. And God responds by saying, "Okay, you are having a rough day. I'll provide you a little bush to keep you cool." But that only lasts a day. God then sends a worm to

eat the bush to rain on Jonah's parade. Jonah can't get a break, can he? Nobody knows the trouble you have seen, Jonah. You poor thing!

"Do you have a right to be angry about the bush? God asks Jonah. Yes, angry enough to die. Oh Jonah, you are absurdly pathetic. You make us laugh...and maybe because we see ourselves.

Do you understand why Jonah is so angry and, it seems to me, so depressed? He's angry with God, with what Edwin Good in a book titled **Irony in the Old Testament**, calls the "absurdity of God." God is not rational, Jonah feels. God doesn't operate like he does and like the rest of us. God is absurdly gracious and compassionate, which is what I think Jesus is saying in today's parable about the workers in the vineyard. God is absurdly gracious to those who have been in the field for a long time **and** to those who haven't. Life fundamentally isn't about mathematics or achievement. Life isn't necessarily fair.

And you have to admit, that doesn't please you. It didn't please Jonah. And honestly, he had every right not to be pleased. The people he was asked to take a message of repentance to were his nation's enemies. The Assyrians were nasty people. They did horrible things to Israel. No wonder he doesn't want to go there. No wonder he heads in the opposite direction from the one that God called him to go to. No wonder he is sulking and wanting to die when God doesn't destroy Nineveh. Enemies are to be hated. They are to be destroyed. They aren't included in God's purview.

People who work the hardest and the longest are to be celebrated. The leaders who are righteous, follow the rules, represent the religious tradition—they are to be highlighted and emulated.

Those who come in at the last minute, well...you know what we think about them. Those who misbehave and break the rules, live outside of the religious tradition, well, they don't deserve the goods.

The insiders, the folks who are like us, who've earned their way, they are the ones whom we want to care for, rejoice in, and focus on. The outsiders, foreigners, enemies, you know how we view them. It's a matter of rationality.

But it's different in the realm of God. You see, God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And this God doesn't fit into your little neat categories or boxes. This God is absurdly compassionate and loving. He doesn't depend upon our scorekeeping schemes. But we will protest. We will throw fits. We will get angry. We will sit on the edge of town, sulk and long to die because life won't mean much if we can't keep score. I mean how much is our life worth if we don't win the game?

But the gospel interrupts our seriousness. It lays bare who we really are. Sometimes it knocks us in the head with a two by four. And sometimes it laughs us into new understanding. Life is not a game to win. Life is a gift to receive. It's all grace folks, a truth that is remarkably freeing. When we get over ourselves, we can laugh a whole lot more at ourselves, and with creation itself, maybe even with the decked-out cows, horses, and platypi!