



THE SCANDAL OF GRACE

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We are living in exciting times these days. Our family stopped in Winco Friday night when Addison spotted this headline in the checkout line: JONAH'S SKELETON FOUND IN WHALE'S MOUTH! This was in Weekly World News, which bills itself as the world's only reliable newspaper. It was between stories about aliens. Turns out Jonah never made it out of the whale at all, which kind of throws a crimp in my sermon series. The article said they found the skeleton in a 2,300 year old humpback whale near Guantanamo Bay. The mystery just keeps getting bigger, doesn't it? I guess I owe you all an apology for the version of events I've been telling. It's hard to argue when they've got pictures to prove it...

There are other exciting things happening these days. It was a big week for season premieres on TV. But I was above being interested in that shallow nonsense, because I'm waiting for the season premiere of Lost, which isn't until later this week...

Last Sunday, the TV guide in the News Tribune featured a story about one new show called Ugly Betty. The show is the story of a homely young girl working in the fashion industry. The basic premise is the old cliché that you can't judge a book by its cover. Although Betty is ugly and unattractive on the outside, she has true inner beauty and her value isn't based on how she looks.

I thought about naming this sermon Ugly Jonah, but the story line would be just the opposite of Ugly Betty. Here's someone who looks like he has it all going for him on the outside: God has chosen him as his prophet and has given him a special assignment. He's experienced the miracle of being swallowed whole by a great fish and living to tell about it. Last week we saw an entire town change because of what he said. Nineveh turned to God because of Jonah. So you put all that together and from the outside, he's the picture of success. But inside, what's going on is ugly and unattractive.

Let's pick up where we left him. Last Sunday we stopped at the point where Nineveh had responded to Jonah's message en masse and God decided not to go through with the destruction he had planned.

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry.

He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

I can't think of too many instances in the Bible where a prophet preached a message and saw the kind of results Jonah saw. He had a 100% success rate, with the entire town changing their course because of what he said. Imagine the population of Federal Way and NE Tacoma combined – all deciding to live for God. How spectacular would that be?

But Jonah drops this bombshell and tells us he's not happy at all. In fact, he's mad about it. The Hebrew language there couldn't be much stronger. He's not just a little miffed – he's furious. After holding his true feelings in through all his wild experiences, Jonah finally explodes and speaks his mind, and we find out what's really been bugging him all along.

It's honest, but it's ugly. Have you ever been to a basketball game where one team is trying to run down the clock? They just pass the ball around in the back court, waiting for the game to end. Jonah thought by heading toward Tarshish that he was running down the clock. He was hoping God's grace period would run out before anyone could warn the Ninevites, and that they would be destroyed on schedule.

That sounds terrible, and it is shocking that Jonah would admit to God so easily that he wanted him to kill these people. Why would he say such a horrible thing?

It helps to know a little bit about who lived in Nineveh. It was a center of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians kept better records than a lot of other civilizations, so scholars know quite a bit about them. One thing that stands out about them and their wars is that they were particularly bloody and cruel. They became known for using psychological warfare to intimidate their enemies. Not to be overly graphic, but the Assyrians would commit atrocities like piling up decapitated heads of their enemies and skinning captives alive. When God said, "Their wickedness has come up before me," he was putting it mildly. They were not nice people. You could think of them as the Osama bin Laden's of Jonah's day.

That puts it in a little different light. Now we can start to sympathize. We begin to see that Jonah's struggle with this had some merit. He wasn't random with his anger. Maybe his complaint was legitimate. Why was God going to hold off his judgment?

Miroslav Volf is an author and professor of theology. One day he was giving a lecture on loving our enemies. Afterwards, someone in the audience stood up and said, "Can you embrace a Serbian soldier?" Miroslav Volf is Croatian. He watched his people systematically raped, butchered and destroyed by Serbian soldiers. The question caught him up short. It cut to the heart of the matter. Was he prepared to love that kind of enemy? How could God ask that of him? And what he had to answer was, "No. I can't. But I feel that as a follower of Christ, I should be able to."

That is the demand that grace makes on each of us – to show to our enemies what God has shown to us. Here's the thing about the book of Jonah. If this story is just about Ugly Jonah, if he was just a big whiner who needed to learn a personal lesson, there wouldn't be a book. If God just wanted to set him straight individually, he would have told him and left it at that. But it's not just Ugly Jonah. It's Ugly Us, too. The same basic attitudes that Jonah wrestled with are deeply engrained in us as well. And they don't look quite as ugly when we see them in ourselves. They seem reasonable. The book of Jonah was written with the assumption that we would find ourselves in his shoes, equally disturbed by the ramifications of God's grace.

And the reality is that **God extends his grace to far more people than we would like.**

What? That sounds crazy. We're nice people, aren't we? We want God to love everybody, don't we? In theory, yes. But when it comes to the practical implications of God being in charge of handing out grace however he pleases, it bothers us. It doesn't satisfy our need for justice. That's the scandal – The God who cares for the suffering people also cares for the ones causing the suffering. Victims and oppressors can both find forgiveness.

That's what Jesus told his own disciples. I like the way The Message translation puts it:

Matthew 5:43-46

“You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves.

This is what God does. He gives his best — the sun to warm and the rain to nourish — to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty.”

Let's get a little more personal than that, though. Most of us aren't in the middle of an ethnic cleansing. Most of us have not personally been the victims of terrorism or severe oppression. But we all do share one thing in common: We all have people in our lives that we would prefer to not share God's grace with. It could be somebody at work who treats us like dirt. It could be a spouse who is unthoughtful. It could be the person who didn't stop at the roundabout when it was your turn to go. It ranges from deep wounds that go way back in our history to the surface level grievances we face every day.

That's why this idea of God's grace is a scandal. When it's for us, it's a huge comfort. When it's for people that we haven't yet forgiven, it's unsettling. It forces us to rethink the position we've taken. Because if God isn't holding a grudge and we are, we're in the same spot as Jonah.

Often, we have very good reasons to hold back forgiveness. The other person hasn't asked for it. The other person doesn't think they've done anything wrong. The other person has caused a lot of pain. God isn't asking us to pretend everything is fine and that ignore our wounds. That's unhealthy.

But the Bible says it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. The grace came before anything. That's what makes it so difficult to come to grips with.

There was a pastor named Will Campbell whose innocent friend was gunned down in one man's senseless act of rage. Another friend of the pastor really pushed him to reconsider his idea of God's grace. Did God really love the guy who shot his friend just as much as anyone else? Will Campbell wrote, “That God would set him free is almost more than I could stand. But unless that is precisely the case, then there is no gospel, there is no good news. Unless that is the truth we have only bad news, we are back with the law alone.”

It's much harder to put this into practice than we think. We are constantly holding back from showing people mercy or love. Give me an excuse to write people off, and chances are I will. Philip Yancey calls this “ungrace.” It's when we just can't bring ourselves to release any measure of compassion or kindness toward somebody else.

This concept of ungrace that shows up in Jonah points out several things. First,

Ungrace loses perspective.

Jonah gets completely melodramatic:

Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.

Just shoot me. If this is how the world operates, I don't want to live anymore.

Earlier this week, when Dallas football player Terrell Owens accidentally overdosed on pain pills, everyone thought it was an attempted suicide. Here's someone who has everything the world has to offer. How could he not see it? How could he throw it all away?

That's where Jonah was – he had every reason in the world to be grateful and happy. But his inability to let go of his anger toward God and his anger toward the Ninevites skewed his perception of the world. Everything looked bleak to him.

When we refuse to forgive someone and we're mad at God for forgiving them, we say with our actions that we don't really agree with God's idea of loving everyone. We'd like there to be some sort of minimum standard. To which God replies,

Romans 9:15-17

*"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."*

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

As Jonah makes his melodramatic statement that he wishes he could just die, God poses the question to Jonah, "Do you have the right to be angry?" It's a rhetorical question, and Jonah knows it. Because when it comes to compassion, God is the only one with rights.

Rich Erickson, one of professors in seminary, said this. "When we complain like this, and when we ask such questions, we forget that we are not as deserving as we think. If he were to take our advice and withdraw his patience, mercy and compassion from those we feel should not receive it...we would find ourselves deprived of it too."

When we intentionally withhold our compassion or forgiveness from someone, we're setting up an entrance requirement that God didn't require of us.

God will have compassion on whom he has compassion. It's entirely his prerogative. It doesn't depend on anything other than his mercy.

Do we have a right to be angry with God? Do we have the right to withhold our compassion and forgiveness from people that he has chosen to show his compassion and forgiveness to? We act like we do. Our perspective gets warped by our own stubbornness.

Jonah has no answer to God's question, so he turns his back and walks outside the city walls to a deserted spot where he can observe things from afar. He doesn't want any more to do with those people. He sets up a makeshift little shelter out of whatever he can find out there and sits down by himself.

Ungrace is isolating. It separates us from other people. It separates us from God's activity. Bruce Wilkinson is a Christian author and pastor, and he was once speaking at a retreat. There was a woman there named Catherine who felt like she just wasn't seeing God doing anything in her life. She felt like she never saw any progress in her life.

Bruce asked her, "Could there be something in your life that is keeping you spiritually stuck?" They looked at a few possibilities of things that might be blocking her growth, and then he said, "Could it be unforgiveness?"

Catherine thought it was strange that he would suggest that. He said, "Maybe I'm mistaken," and they parted ways.

The next morning, she asked to talk. All at once, all this bitterness toward her mom started pouring out. So Bruce asked her to go back and list all the injuries and accusations she associated with her mom. So she went back to her room.

The next morning, she came to him again. She had five sheets of paper in her hand, filled with small print on both sides. She said, "This is it. This controls my life." A lifetime of pain poured out. The scars her mother had left were very real. But that wasn't the source of the heartache anymore for Catherine. She could see that it was her inability to forgive her mom that was now doing damage to her life. She went back home, reconciled with her mom and wrote to Bruce that she felt like her soul could breathe again for the first time.

So often we sideline ourselves like Jonah. We hold on to ungrace. We don't want to be the first one to make a move or offer our forgiveness. And it leads to isolation. Once we've isolated ourselves, we begin to conclude that God should only be concerned about us, instead of everyone else.

Donald Miller says, "The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is this: Life is a story about me... No rut in the mind is so deep as the one that says I am the world, the world belongs to me, all people are characters in my play. There is no addiction so powerful as self-addiction."

What's startling and refreshing to realize is that even when we've isolated ourselves,

Ungrace is still graced.

Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine.

God has infinite patience. After all that Jonah has been through, after all that God has had to do to prod him along, to rescue him and to keep him on track, he's still complaining and bellyaching. If I were God, I would have wanted to smack him. But God lets him vent. Not only that, God provides a vine that makes Jonah very happy. As mad as he was before, he has now swung the opposite way to a state of sheer bliss.

The word for vine is not very precise, so it could have been several different kinds of plants. Scholars think it might have been a castor oil plant, because they grow in that region, they're tall and they have really big leaves that would make a nice canopy. The point is that the plant was there to provide protection from the sun and give him some comfort. I know God later uses it to teach him a lesson, but it says right there in the text that God provided it to shade his head and ease his discomfort.

What a beautiful picture of what God's grace does for us. God protects us from what we deserve, and gives us a source of comfort and joy. Even when we are at our worst, we still can be experiencing God's grace. God is still caring for you when you are defying him.

You might be here today thinking, "I don't think I'm ready to forgive this person. I am hurting too much to just let go of the anger." Let me just say a word to you this morning: Sometimes we as Christians can feel pressure to rush each other to forgiveness immediately, when some processes take time. When a doctor stitches up a wound, they can't just close it up right away – they have to make sure it's all cleaned out first so that it doesn't get infected. We need to make sure that we go about healing wounds in a healthy way and not seek resolution so quickly that we ignore issues and emotions that are going to cause trouble for us later. My point with Jonah here is to encourage you that even as you are in the process of moving toward forgiveness, God is offering his grace to you along the way – his comfort and protection are here for you right now.

It's this vine of comfort and protection that God then uses to gently guide Jonah back out of ungrace. God kills off the vine, which Jonah views as a travesty. He is emotionally distraught because of it.

You can picture Jonah waking up and being horrified to see the wilting leaves on his vine. Maybe he desperately checked on the plant to see what's wrong with it. You can see him scrambling for some water, maybe some stakes to prop it up. He would do ANYTHING to help it survive. Which was exactly the point.

But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

This simple comparison not only showed how much more valuable Nineveh was – it also gave Jonah a path for regaining a better perspective through fingerprints, faces and a future.

Fingerprints

First, God points out that Jonah has been all worried about a plant that he didn't tend or make grow. That's in contrast with God's role in Nineveh. He was at work there. He cultivated those lives. They were his creations. He had a personal investment in the people there, so he had every reason to care about them.

Often, when we dismiss people or fail to offer them any measure of God's grace, it's because we are not seeing God's fingerprints on their lives. We aren't recognizing that he has much at stake in their well being. Just as Jesus pointed out to his disciples how much more valuable they were than sparrows, God wanted Jonah to see that the people were far more significant than the vine, because God had his fingerprints on them.

Faces

Secondly, Jonah appears to have been thinking of Nineveh as a city rather than people. Forty days and Nineveh will be overturned. But God says, "it's not just a city – it's 120,000 human beings. They have names. They have faces."

We tend to reduce people to the wrongs they have done to us. Lewis Smedes once wrote, "When you forgive someone, you slice away the wrong from the person who did it... At one moment you identify him as the person who did you wrong. The next moment you change that identity. He is remade in your memory.."

I like that imagery, because I do that all the time. I label people by what they've done to me instead of seeing them just as people with needs. I need to learn to slice away the offenses and start to see faces. People are more than the sum of their offenses.

Future

God also refers to Nineveh as people who don't know their right from their left. That's like young children who have a lot of life ahead of them. He also calls Nineveh a "great city." There is potential for a future that Jonah has ignored.

Last week I said that God doesn't look at us and see our past – he sees our future and what could still be possible. He invites us to share in that attitude when we think of other people. Instead of dwelling on the ways we have been hurt by them, forgiveness allows us to see them as people. Great potential is yet ahead of them.

The book ends with God's question to Jonah hanging in the air. Shouldn't he be concerned about Nineveh? I read that the word there for concerned literally means to have tears in your eyes. Jonah had tears in his eyes over the dying plant. If that meant so much to him, shouldn't God have tears in his eyes over all the dying people? Shouldn't we? I want to care about what God cares about. I want to be bigger than my hurts, to

have the courage to dig down deep and find some compassion for people instead of seeing them as problems.

Grace is so much bigger and broader than we ever imagined. It gets closer than we like and it stretches further away from us than we like. God's people have always struggled with the size of it. Jonah stands as a witness to that struggle.

And the miracle is, as conflicted and frustrated as Jonah was, God still used him. The man who miraculously came back from three days and nights in the depths brought the chance of a new life to Nineveh. He demonstrated just how far God was willing to go to reach out and rescue a people he cared about.

And Jonah was a picture of when Christ would come back from three days and nights in the depths of the earth to bring us a chance of new life. Jonah became part of God's big story, pointed to Christ's work on the cross as God's ultimate demonstration of how far God is willing to go to reach us and rescue us.

Jonah couldn't understand how the God who is on the side of the poor and the hurting could find it in his heart to forgive the people causing the pain. That's the jolting side of grace, but in the end, it's the only way for it to really be grace.

I always think of that classic 80's movie "Places in the Heart" with Sally Fields. The story takes place during the Great Depression. A young, drunk African American boy accidentally shoots and kills a sheriff. The sheriff's widow, played by Sally Fields, is left to raise two kids on her own. Local white community leaders form an angry lynch mob and kill the boy who shot the sheriff. The widow takes in a blind man and a black drifter, who help her as she grows cotton to support her family. They go through all kinds of struggles and hardships, and the KKK members eventually beat and chase off the black man.

All this murder and hate goes on and on through the movie. But it ends with this scene in a little church. The congregation is taking communion and the plate with pieces of bread is being passed down each row. And you see Sally Fields take the plate and pass it to her husband and say "peace of Christ." Then he turns and passes it to the boy who killed him, and he passes it to the man who hanged him. One by one it changes hands from the cruel heartless people and those they have harmed, with each one saying to the next, "peace of Christ."

It's a powerful scene that takes us to the only place where this kind of grace can be found, and that's at the cross. It always comes back to the cross. In that one selfless act of dying, Jesus identified completely with everyone who has ever suffered any kind of injustice. He was the ultimate victim, the innocent man given a death sentence.

But in that death was also pardon for his executioners. "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing." Through a willing, voluntary death, Jesus took on the punishment all our wickedness deserves. Perfect goodness paid the price for pure evil.

Hanging on a cross, Jesus extends his arms in two directions -- one hand gripping the wounded, Ugly Jonahs, one hand gripping the wicked Ninevites.

The fact is that we're all Ugly Jonahs and we're all Ninevites. We're sinners and sinned against. We need God's grace to be big enough for everyone, because we're in the same spot as everyone. We share in the same bread. We share in the same cup. And we are called to share in the same peace of Christ. Praise God for the scandal of grace.