

“Uncommon Love, Unsearchable Greatness”

Psalm 145: 1-7; Jonah 3:10-4:11 - Tesa Hauser

Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California - September 24, 2023

Reconciliation Ministry Sunday #2

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we may be able to see, and be a part of your love and greatness in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Last week, Pastor Rebecca encouraged us to not shy away from confronting and talking about our past as a nation and as the Church, especially the ugly and hard parts. In confessing, we have the chance to repent and move toward unity, justice and spiritual growth, and share the good news of God’s “unmitigated mercy” to one another and our neighbors. We continue to see how important unmuting and God’s mercy ring true in our Scriptures this morning.

I am thankful for stories like Jonah. Not just for the fact that it’s a quick four chapter read, or that the VeggieTales movie based on the story was instrumental in my childhood formation, one that my sister and I quote often. The story of Jonah places a mirror right in front of our faces and we have no option other than to confront ourselves.

The story of Jonah is not a simple one, though. God at one point does put the lives of a few innocent sailors at risk so that Jonah would do what God wanted. God was going to destroy Nineveh, and we don’t know if repenting of their evil ways was going to make any difference. Thankfully it did, and we see God’s mercy, compassion, and love, for the people of Nineveh. We aren’t told what evils

Nineveh had committed to deserve such a fate, but the historical Nineveh was at one point before its fall, the capital city within the Assyrian empire. They were known for their brutality. Still, this was common in the Ancient Near East. War and brute force meant survival for kingdoms and their people. The text doesn't tell us what their evils were, but we do know that once confronted about it, the leaders of Nineveh did what they could for their people and livestock, to live.

In Jonah 3:9, the king says, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." The king doesn't even know if all their effort will work, but it will have been worth it to repent and change from their ways, not just so that God will have mercy, but that their people will live better lives. I'm obviously reading in between the lines here, but they don't know God at this point in the story. They believe that God is somewhat powerful and that their entire city is at risk. They are grateful for the warning and so they did what they could, but they don't know what the outcome will be. We aren't told if God gave them the option, but can assume God did. We also don't know if they started to worship the God of Israel, but know that the encounter changed their lives.

I also appreciate the story of Jonah since we often hear about the "God of the Old Testament," the God that is constantly angry or upset at people. Which is not hard to understand, people have abused power, and abused people. It's so deeply

embedded into human history that to ignore all of that and assume that a loving, compassionate, merciful, and just God won't be angry when there is evil, is to pretend like evil doesn't happen! Which we know and were taught, is not a good idea. However, there is the other side of the coin here as well.

Jonah, upon learning that God has decided to have mercy, becomes angry. He yells at God and essentially says, "I knew you were going to be all loving, and merciful, and compassionate to *those* people. That's why I didn't want to come here in the first place. I'd rather die than to live with this!" It is not included in today's reading, but Jonah quotes Psalm 145:8, "The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Psalm 145 is a reminder of who God is, how compassionate, how gracious, and merciful, and faithful, and just, and on and on and on. That in that knowledge we should live a life called by God forever and that even as we search for God's greatness, it is so vast and so grand that it can never be found. How do we respond? As one commentary I read said, "...Psalm 145 invites us to live in the world of God's reign, the world where the fundamental reality and pervasive power is the gracious, compassionate, faithful love of God."

That won't make sense to the rest of the world, like it could not make sense to Jonah. He could not understand how the wonderful and awesome God could forgive and save the people of Nineveh! It was mind boggling and ridiculous, to

the point of anger and death. It was like the people and the religious leaders who could not understand why Jesus called tax collectors, and sat with those who were viewed as sinner, undeserving, dirty, unworthy, who didn't comply with the social norms. It could not make sense to the point of Jesus crucified, murdered for his uncommon love, compassion, mercy, and grace.

The story of Jonah isn't to excuse evil in the world, or to allow people to continue doing wrong and magically God's mercy will appear in their lives and they will change their ways. However, through Scripture we know that encounters with the living God are life-altering, and many people choose to repent. It shows that the potential for repentance is available to all people, and that in doing so we get to experience God's love and greatness. We get to experience it over and over again, and we are asked over and over to repent and reconcile.

The people of Nineveh talked about who they were and what they had done wrong, and that they needed to change their ways. They weren't silent about the truth, and it allowed them to repent. It allowed them to see what needed to be done differently in order to live better lives. I'm sure it took more work than what we see in the text, but it was the beginning. For reconciliation and repentance are not one time acts, but they should be integrated into our lives like eating, sleeping, and any other part of living. They will feel foreign and uncommon, for we are swimming in

the water of “false unity” and “politeness,” that are for our comfort, rather than for the kin-dom of God.

I am not naive to the fact that we live in a society and that there are rules, but I am also aware that there are structures that want us to care more about “me” than for my neighbor. The good news somehow slips into the prosperity gospel or Christian Nationalism, and we might not realize it before it’s too late if we don’t remind ourselves of stories like Jonah. The whole book is a story of mercy - God has mercy on Jonah and on the people of Nineveh. Both experienced God’s love and goodness and chose to respond how they did.

God doesn’t ask or tell Jonah to stop being angry - the people of Nineveh were known to be evil. Instead, God asks Jonah as he had compassion on the plant that withered away, can he not also have compassion on Nineveh? They did choose to repent and change their ways. Jonah has been able to see a glimpse of God’s uncommon love, and unsearchable greatness, and makes a choice. Moving forward he has another choice to make, to continue to be angry or share the good news with others.

I’m going to say something that I think is hard, but it doesn’t always have to make sense. I know we are a congregation that doesn’t believe in disconnecting our minds here, and I am thankful and I agree, we shouldn’t. We need those minds to come together and figure out and be the people God has called us to be. How do

we keep remembering? How do we become anti-racist and pro-reconciling? How do we care for our neighbor, our neighborhood, and creation where we live? How do we build community in ways that all people are truly welcome and can experience God's uncommon love and unsearchable greatness? How do we live in God's unity, instead of a false unity?

And I am telling you that sometimes it won't make sense to every single person what we do and how we do it, but it should be done in love, in compassion, in grace, and in faithfulness to the God who first called us. We don't have to understand racism on a personal level, in order to listen to our siblings who are asking us to believe them that it happens and help fight against it. It is even better if we try to understand, but we might not always. We don't have to understand all the details of the past to talk about how ugly parts were and believe that it has impacted our present. We don't have to understand in order to work toward change.

We don't have to understand, and know that it can't be understood, how God can be so loving and merciful. However, God has promised and we continue to live in that promise. Let us live like we believe that the good news is true today, tomorrow, and forever more, for us, and all people. Hallelujah and Amen.