

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – October 16, 2011 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on Jonah 4:5-11 written by Pastor Paul Horn

**“The LORD shows compassion on those who do not deserve it.”**

The story of Jonah and the whale, or is it Jonah and the big fish? What kind of fish was it? How did Jonah survive inside that big fish for three days and nights? Why did Jonah think he could run away from God? Good questions... but since we as Christians want to grow in our understanding of Scripture, we want to dig deeper, and ask the more important question, “Why did God spare a nation that was so ungodly?”

The LORD told Jonah, **“Go to Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”** To say that Nineveh was wicked was an understatement. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria. Historically it is known that the Assyrians were ruthless people. If the Geneva Convention had been in effect in those days, the Assyrians would have broken every rule and even some human rights violations that the Convention doesn't cover. As a nation they were true pagans; engaged in witchcraft, commercial exploitation, widespread prostitution - they would not have made the cut even for an HBO miniseries.

We can understand why Jonah hopped in a boat and sailed for Spain. Jonah walking into Nineveh would be like a Lutheran pastor walking into Iran or Saudi Arabia. They would most likely arrest him, torture him and drag him through the streets until he was dead. That's not why Jonah ran away. He said, **“I fled because I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”** (Jonah 4:1,2) Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because he knew who the LORD was – a God who loves to show mercy. He knew why God had sent him - to preach repentance. He knew how God worked – through Jonah's message the Holy Spirit would work repentance in the hearts of the Ninevites.

That was the plan God had in mind and Jonah wasn't going to change those plans. God got Jonah's attention, through the mouth of a big fish, and got him back on dry ground and got his feet turned toward Nineveh.

The Bible tells us that Nineveh was a large city, 120,000 people, and it took three days to travel through the city. As Jonah walked through the city he proclaimed, “Repent! In 40 days the LORD will destroy this place!” And, just as Jonah suspected, the people listened. They believed God's threat. They stopped doing wicked things. From the smallest child in the slums to the king in the palace, they all put on sackcloth and ashes - signs of repentance.

**“Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ‘It would be better for me to die.’”** (4:1-3) Why was he so mad? Jonah was a Jew, someone who belonged to a nation that had been chosen by God out of all the nations of the world to carry the line of the Savior - the only nation on earth that could claim the only One, True God as its God. And for God to show mercy and compassion and blessings on a nation that was so godless and who had actually fought against God's own people was just sickening to him. It didn't seem fair.

The 40 days were not up yet, so Jonah marched out of the city and up a hill to get a good view of the city and he built a shelter there. He would wait it out. Maybe God would still destroy his enemies. The Bible tells us that the LORD provided a vine, which grew up over the shelter. God increased the comfort level of his stubborn prophet. That evening, however, God sent a worm, which used that vine as a lunch and dinner buffet. The vine withered and died. That morning the sun rose with a vengeance, beating down on Jonah's head. He grew faint and complained, **“It would be better for me to die.”**

God put Jonah in his place, “How shallow! You did nothing to make this vine grow and now it’s dead. And you’re angry about that? It’s a plant! But look at this city - 120,000 people, 120,000 souls – who do not know their left from their right, spiritually. What about them? You showed more compassion for that vine than you did for these people.” Jonah was mad because God shows compassion on those who do not deserve it.

What gets you all riled up? Which political or moral issues get your blood boiling and your face red? Letters to the editor were published in the newspaper nearly every day in September over the vote for expanded alcohol sales in Hardin County – letters written by very emotional people. Maybe that didn’t get you all riled up. What gets you going? Gun control, abortion, the legal definition of marriage, taxes, the war, national debt, Republicans, Democrats or Independents? All I have to do is mention those topics and already you’re spinning in your seat!

The point is, so often we get all worked up over social or political issues, and yet, do we show that same zeal and concern for those who cannot tell their left from their right spiritually? A commercial on TV for abused animals will leave us with tears in our eyes and reaching for our checkbooks, but do we shed the same tears and are we just as quick to financially support our missionaries who are reaching out to those abused by Satan and sin and their fear of death?

These are unbelievers; people who do not know Jesus as their Savior from Satan and sin and the grave. They are people you know – a coworker, your boss, a family member, a friend. What can happen is that, like Jonah, we tend not to have compassion on them because of who they are; the boss is a jerk, the coworker makes life miserable, a family member and friend torment you to no end. These people do not deserve God’s compassion (in our opinion). What really gets us is when we hear about pedophiles, rapists, kidnappers, the man who killed 8 people in a beauty salon in California, suicide bombers who kill our troops, corporations and banks guilty of greed and corruption, politicians who abuse your tax dollars, drug dealers, drunk drivers – do they deserve God’s compassion? We shout a resounding, “No!” But what does God tell us? My Son died for those people! He suffered hell for them. And those among them who repent, who acknowledge their sins, and look to Christ for forgiveness, will be forgiven! They will not be destroyed on the Day of Judgment.

Like the workers in the vineyard from Jesus’ parable, we, who toil all our lives under the sun of persecution and the cross, who labor for our Lord and his gospel, receive the same gift as those who later in lives receive the gift of life. After a life of corruption and wickedness they go to heaven, too, because they repented? And we complain, “It’s not fair!”

Who deserves God’s grace? No one! Because of the state of our natural sinful condition, we deserve nothing from God. Due to the sins we just listed - our lack of compassion and lack of enthusiasm to seek the abused souls of this world – according to those sins alone, we deserve nothing from God. We are deserving of eternal destruction just as much as if we had strolled into that beauty salon and pulled the trigger on 8 innocent people.

So why are you here today? Why is it that in the service I said, “You who are loved by the Lord!” Because you’re good people? Because you’re better than most? Because you deserve it? No. Because of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. Because of God’s love which we do not deserve, he has compassion on us and does not destroy us.

God’s love is like a man who has a job as a railroad operator, controlling train traffic by switching tracks. Day after day, he sits in a little booth high above the railway yard, watching carefully as speeding trains rumble through. They depend on him to prevent accidents. One day, the operator's five-year-old boy comes to visit his father from their nearby home. Seeing dad up in the control booth, he runs shouting and waving across the railroad tracks. Just as his dad notices him, the boy trips and gets his foot caught between a switching track. He's stuck. He can't get free. The father leaps to his

feet to help the boy but at that moment a piercing whistle gets his attention. He looks and in horror sees a speeding train only a few hundred yards away.

The train is filled with passengers. It is heading right for another passenger train. If the man does not switch the tracks, all of those people will die. If the man switches the tracks, it will lead that train right over his son. The father is forced to make a decision. What will he do? He lowers his head, and switches the track, and saves the people at the cost of his son.

This is what your Father in heaven did for you. You and I and all people of the world were riding the railroad to eternal destruction, yet the Father pulled the lever and switched the tracks and did not spare his own Son. So great is his love for you! A train full of sinners, who do not deserve love, are spared. His only Son, beloved by him, is not spared the train ride to hell and God's wrath and the cross - in order to spare the world. So great is his grace! He has compassion on those who do not deserve it.

From Romans, the Second Lesson this morning, Paul wrote, **“Salvation does not depend on man's desire or effort but on God's mercy.”** And thank God for that! For if it were to depend on my efforts, my weak human condition, in my sinful wickedness, I would be lost forever. But by God's grace, he has compassion on... not only the world, but on me, and you – that in spite of our sins of apathy and unconcern for those who cannot tell their right from their left spiritually, God forgives me, and he forgives you, and continues to reassure you of that forgiveness.

He says to you, “God our Father has given his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for your sins.” God did not spare his own Son, and at the cost of his blood, covered over your sins. He will say to you in a few minutes, “Take and eat, take and drink for the forgiveness of your sins.” He says to you through his called servant, “...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Words spoken over you at your baptism, now remind you that through the water and Word God made you his, and that through faith in Christ God has made you worthy of heaven.

God the Father continues to remind you that he loves you through his Word and Sacraments. He continues to remind through stories like this one, Jonah and the Ninevites. He reminds you and me that there are others in this world who are just as undeserving of his mercy – but they are souls, nonetheless, for whom his Son Jesus died. So now, go and work in God's vineyard, and share God's compassion and his grace. Amen.