

# *The Ones Who Love*

Jonah 4:4-11

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ August 20, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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4 And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city.

6 The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

9 But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." 10 Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:4-11, NRSV)

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It turns out, I need to learn to ask for help.

A few weeks ago, on our mission trip to Crescent City, we were told we were going to play a game in the sand right along the beautiful Smith River. We were told that the whole group of about 60 people needed to enter in this circle of sand [much bigger than this one] that was laid out for us and that we had to try to find a ball that would be inside that circle somewhere. But we had to do it without opening our eyes. Ever. So, except for a few people that would be on the edges for safety, we all got in the middle of the circle and began to shuffle around to try to find this ball. Those who found the ball would be able to open their eyes, they

would win the game! They could join the others at the edge of the circle.

You may not know this about me, unless you've played hearts with me or Ultimate Frisbee, well, anything, I guess – I'm highly competitive. I entered the circle with these thoughts in mind:

- I'm not going to open my eyes.
- I am going to be one of the first to find this ball – whatever it takes.

So, there I was, running into people, causing all kinds of mayhem, shuffling around trying to make contact with this ball. At one point I heard one of the staff members say, "If you need a little help just raise your hand". Well, that went against everything I believed in. So I carried on. But eventually there were

fewer and fewer people in the circle, and these instructions were repeated several times. But I would not be moved. So eventually the game was coming to a close and I heard them start a countdown. Remember if you need help, raise your hand. Five, four, three, two, and then I realized what was happening. I raised my hand with 2 seconds left to spare, and a ball was thrust into my arms. I opened my eyes and there it was.

The ball was never on the ground. It was only given to those who raised their hand to ask for help – something I was very hesitant to do.

For the rest of the night, I was pondering all of the ways I wait until the last possible second to ask for help. Only when my health, or my finances, or my workload, or my safety reaches a place where I have no other out. That's when I ask for help.

The Ninevites didn't have a lot going for them. They were a vicious people. We've covered that territory. This is why Jonah was sent to them. But they did have this going for them: they knew how to receive help when it was offered. Jonah eventually arrives with his eight-word sermon: "40 days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown". Immediately, they believe Jonah, they believe God, and they declare a fast, promising to turn their lives around. Jonah said, "Raise your hand if you need a little help, and they all raise their hands, and the very thing that Jonah was afraid of [because he knows the character of God] comes true. God forgives them. This is the reason that he fled to Tarshish – or almost died trying.

As I looked at this passage this week, it led me to two different questions. The first is this: What if we could be more like these people? What if I could be more like these people? A people that heard a challenging word, found the truth in it, and immediately began to make changes, to turn around and go a different direction, because they recognize they're in danger?

But ultimately, this passage is not really about the Ninevites. It's more about Jonah's response to the Ninevites, and about his response to God's mercy.

So, here's the second question: What if we are more like Jonah than we think?

At this point in the story, he's not looking so good. On one hand he is looking down on this entire city of people for not living their lives for God the way he has. He's banking on the fact that his Jewish upbringing and his way of life and his background will be his ticket to a right relationship with God. And he doesn't feel like the Ninevites have that.

It's fine, wouldn't you agree, to take some pride in the decisions we make that aim at living a life pleasing to God? The way we treat others, the time we spend in Scripture, being a part of a church community. Great things for our own growth, right? But I want to put up the word **disproportionate** here. You'll see this in the study questions if you look at it with a group or on your own later. My pride becomes *disproportionate* when I fail to see that my NEED for God (even with any good decisions I'm making) makes me more *like* the rest of humanity than I think. The misconception is that I

can cover up my need for God with my good behavior.

The design of those disciplines that God gives us is to bring us humility and awareness not of how good we are, but of how good God is, and to pair us together with other people that we think are outside of God's grace. This wasn't happening for Jonah yet.

There was another aspect of Jonah's attitude that was *disproportionate*. The focus on his own comfort. He was disproportionately happy when he discovered this place of shade where he could simply watch what was going on across the valley. He failed to realize it was God who simply spoke a word and created this wonderful shade for him. So just as quickly, God took that shade away. He used a word to create the shade, and he used a worm to take it away. Both were demonstrations of God's power in an attempt to show Jonah that God was a part of providing for him.

Then, his annoyance at the hot sun was *disproportionate* to what he should have been looking across the valley to see.

God: "Look Jonah, you are one person complaining about your comfort. Over there are 120,000 people that will be destroyed unless I provide for them the way I have provided for you in your life."

Math was not on Jonah's side. Maybe he didn't like math. Here's a quick clip from last week's performance from the kids in our church called the "Artful Dodgers". You'll need to check it out as soon as it's available. Here they are with a song

about not liking math that the Ninevites were singing:

[clip of math song]

At the beginning of this week, I had massive back strain that laid me up for a couple of days. At one point I took a hot bath as I started to feel better to try to relax my muscles. And as I was wiping my face with my towel in the hot bath, I dropped part of the towel into the bath. I was so annoyed that I had done that, because now I had a wet towel. And it occurred to me that I hadn't even recognized that my pain had subsided. I had failed to take the opportunity to thank God for some relatively quick healing at a time when so many around this world are in such pain or experiencing loss of life or homes or livelihoods in places like Hawaii or Kelowna and in so many places in our world.

Jonah is going to need a change of heart if this story is going to end well. It's amazing how disproportionate annoyances can distract us from the opportunity to have compassion on the people God has given us a view to see.

This is not the end of Jonah story. And it's not the end of ours. Let me read this final question of God to Jonah in its entirety and let it hang just for a second as it does at the end of the story.

*You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night (you failed to recognize my love and Power in the midst of your own annoyances and your own Pride). God goes on... <sup>11</sup> And should I not be concerned about*

*Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals? (4:10-11)*

“Do you see how your pride and your annoyances are disproportionate to what I’m doing to build my kingdom in this world, (and how you have always been a recipient of it, like the older son in The Prodigal Son story), but now I have an opportunity to do a new thing with a people that are sorry for what they’ve done, that are willing to repent?”

I don’t know if you noticed, but this story has a surprise ending. The last ones who receive God’s mercy and God’s embrace is not Jonah, it’s not even the Ninevites themselves – it’s their animals!

Three quick things to mention here about animals. It’s an aside, but related:

1. All creation is designed to live and serve the Lord. We see it in the fish that swallowed Jonah. We see it in the worm that ate the bush. I guess it just seems right that God should mention that the animals at the end.
2. The word “animals” here could also be translated as “cattle.” So, we’re not really talking about pets, although I think God would not exclude them as well. But we’re talking primarily about their whole economy and their livelihood. It’s one thing for us to say to our enemies, “Fine God! Spare their lives.” It’s quite another for us to say, “Spare their lives and help them to prosper. Make their lives full and happy.” God is inviting

Jonah into that kind of attitude. Jesus says, “I have come that you might have life. And not only to have *life*, but to have it in ‘abundance’” is the word he uses. Can we say in a Christ-like way about our enemies, “May you have life and may you have abundantly?” That’s going to take an attitude shift.

3. And finally, this is just one more fantastic way to continue to expand the breadth of God’s love. When Paul prays for the Ephesians that they would know how long and high and wide and deep is the love of God... this is the wide part. How far away does God’s mercy really extend? We know God loved the Jewish people. Jonah and Judaism knew that, *disproportionately* all too well. But God’s love also extends to Jonah, as obnoxious and ungrateful as he seems to be. God’s love extends to Phoenician sailors and to Ninevites punks. But these last words of including the animals reminds us that there is nothing in all creation that God does not wish to restore. There’s no place that we can go with God’s mercy and Grace that does not wish to take part in recreating this difficult world.

Jonah knows that God is a forgiving God. In his own words from the last chapter: “I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.” He knew it for himself, but didn’t know he needed this mercy as much as the Ninevites. Deep down, he assumed there were limits to God’s mercy.

So, Jonah sat down to watch what God would do, and get as comfortable as possible. He awaited the dopamine hit of satisfaction as the destruction began. He'd done the work, delivered the message, and now he wanted some distance. He wanted comfort.

We have become a culture of *watchers*. I talked with someone this week about the dopamine hit that we are all being enticed with, a place of comfort in front of screen where we can spend so much time simply watching. For most of us, 2, 3, or even 4 hours a day are spent on a screen over and above any time in our work or study lives. Now, how many other activities in your life compete with that kind of time – activities that you have the patience to engage in for that long. It would be good to find those activities again.

There is such a feeling of detachment in Jonah, out here away from the city, just watching. I find myself wanting him to get up from his perch and walk back into the city be among these people.

In effect, Jonah is praying that God would bring down destruction, and make it fast because he was hot and he wanted to get back home.

The response to this prayer is this final question. By the way, you never want God to answer a prayer with a question. It usually means he's got some work to do in us that is not going to be easy, that will demand some participation. Here, God shows Jonah what mercy looks like: *up grows this plant*. God shows Jonah what destruction looks like: *down comes the plant*. And his question asks him to

wrestle with the fact that Jonah AND the Ninevites get God's love, which includes both mercy and judgement. They are no different. Now Jonah has to decide if he's okay with that, and what his next move will be.

Another way of communicating this to Jonah might be for God to say: "*You think you're in pain because you're in the hot sun? This is nothing compared to my pain that these Ninevites have turned away from me. I have compassion for these people that causes deep pain. I'm God, but I have chosen to love these people till it hurts.*"

Tim Keller calls this love of God "Voluntary Love". Involuntary love is a love that you simply feel because someone causes you to like them and want to be near to them. It's a love that is deserved or earned in some way because of something you do or the kind of person you are. When the conditions are lost, the love goes away. "Voluntary Love" is a love that *chooses* another, deciding to love *regardless* if it's deserved or earned. This kind of love *knows* ahead of time that there will be times of intense pain because the other will at times go a different direction and hurt us deeply.

God voluntarily loves each one of us this way, even when we have no idea what we're doing. What kind of people are the Ninevites? People who *do not know their left hand from their right*. They don't know they are causing this pain to their God...until Jonah brings the 8 words.

All of this should sound really familiar. Jonah was outside of Nineveh in pain, and God says, "I love them. They don't

know what they're doing." About 700 years later, Jesus would be outside of Jerusalem in pain upon a cross. And what will he say? "Father, love them, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He's not just talking to those who drove the nails. He's talking to his betraying disciples, his blood relatives, his closest friends. All of creation causes God pain because of the deep love he has. He demonstrates on the cross how deeply he loves and how much it hurts for his children to turn away.

Here's what I found myself wondering as we wrap up Jonah: What if there was a Chapter 5? I'd love it if you could talk in your life groups with some imagination about what happened next to Jonah? How did he *probably* respond? Or how do you *hope* he responded? And what does that mean in your own life?

Recently I googled the top things non-Christians say about Christians. Some of the usual responses came up: They are too judgmental, too hypocritical, too nationalistic, too set in their own ways and beliefs. But a couple of the responses surprised me. A high percentage of non-Christians would love to have friends that are Christians to be able to have honest conversations about what they believe or even invite them to church! Really? Then another response said it more bluntly this way: *Christians stink at friendship.*

CAREY NIEUWHOF wrote this in the article: "...*relatively few Christians actively pursue meaningful friendships with people who don't share their faith. Between churches that offer programs 5*

*nights a week (leaving little time for Christians to make friends outside the church) and Christians who are afraid of the world, many Christians don't pursue authentic relationships with non-Christians".<sup>1</sup>*

Jonah was too proud or too busy or too concerned with his own comfort to walk back into the mess that had become the groveling Ninevites. He couldn't believe that God would see him in the same camp, or that his circle should include these people as well.

I'm borrowing a slide from Jeff's message last week. He mentioned that Karl Bart had summed up his 10,000-page essentials about what to believe into four words: "The One Who Loves."

Where does this lead us? Let me insert a verse from Paul to the Galatian people. He writes: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Really, this is the whole arc of the story of Scripture. God told Abraham that he would be blessed to be a blessing to others. The two greatest commandments are to love God *and* love others. We love because...Jesus first loved us.

Knowing God as the One Who Loves leads us to freedom and joy. We heard that last week. But why? To be humble enough to love others the way we've been loved by God. We know it, then we offer it to others.

<sup>1</sup> <https://careynieuwhof.com/3-things-christians-do-that-non-christians-despise/>

What if all of the articles written about what people thought about Christians/followers of Jesus could be summed up in just four words: “The Ones Who Love?” We only become the ones who love when we can answer the question at the end of this book. Why shouldn’t God be concerned about the Ninevites...and their animals...any less than God is concerned about us?

If you wanted an 8-word sermon and you’ve heard nothing else, then here it is, also in question form:

“Can the church become THE ONES WHO LOVE?” What will it take?

Let me end where we started: with a circle in the sand. Most of us, if we’re honest, have a circle somewhere drawn in the sand that includes all of the people that we are convinced are included in God’s covenant. They are worthy of it, they deserve it, they’ve accepted it, however we might define that. Jonah certainly had a circle. It didn’t include the Ninevites, but he was being asked to widen his circle to include them. To which you can almost hear Jonah saying back: “Then where will it end?”

It will be a lifelong process for us to continue expanding the circle, being challenged by Scripture to answer that question. And keep answering it until there are some in this world that say:

Those Christians...those believers...They are the ones who know how to love. I want to know that Jesus. I want to know their God.

God is good? [All the time]. Does it feel like God is a little TOO good to some people? Let’s pray and talk about it this week.

Amen?

## NEXT STEP QUESTIONS:

1. Read Jonah 4:4-11 again. What do you like or dislike about the way Jonah’s story ends?
2. What would you say is the overall message to us in Jonah’s story?
3. It may not be hard to believe that God feels compassion and mercy toward our Faith community as part of God’s people, but what group of people do you have a more difficult time believing God also feels compassion and mercy toward?
4. As far as your walk with the Lord, in what do you tend to take pride in “disproportionately”?
5. What annoys you “disproportionately” that distracts you from offering compassion to others?
6. Using some imagination, if there was a “Chapter 5” to Jonah’s story, what would it be about?
7. In what ways would you characterize our church Community as “The Ones Who Love”?
8. Read the final question to Jonah again (...should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city...). Is there a way

you could practice Christ-like compassion toward a group of people in your world?

TABLE TO TABLE:

Who are the people that are hard to care for sometimes?

What is a way we can show them God's kindness?