

All is Grace

From the series: Images of God in the Stories of Jesus

Text: Psalm 130:3-4; Luke 18:13-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

*If you, O Lord, should mark inequities, Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. Psalm 130:3-4*

*God, be merciful to me, a sinner! I tell you this man went down to his hour justified ...
All who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke 18:13-14*

I had an interesting week this past week. I received a sweatshirt with a cartoon on the front that had a dog, a Dalmatian, preaching, saying "Bad, Bad, Dog." The dogs (Dalmatians) were lined in the pews and underneath it said, "Hell, Fire and Dalmatians." (Laughter) I got a good laugh out of that and some warmth as well!

I received some interesting letters, and notes too, very nice ones about last week's sermon. Thank you for those. I received a pew card too. It raised a question about the mercy of God about which I spoke. The question was about the mercy of God in regard, for example, to a Hitler or to a Saddam Hussein (to update it a little bit). That question always arises when you talk about mercy in God, or sin in us. I would have thought perhaps that the paragraph in the bulletin by Carlyle Marney might have forestalled such a question. If you remember, he said:

Man is the most dangerous and savage of the beasts: His bite is poisonous; his hand is a club; his foot is a weapon; knives, clubs, spears are projectiles to bear his hostility. Nothing in nature is so well equipped for hating or hurting. Confuse him and he may lash out at everything. Crowd him and he kills, robs, and destroys, for his crime rate increases in proportion to his crowding. Deprive him and he retaliates. Impoverish him and he burns villas in the night. Enslave him and he revolts. Pamper him and he may poison you. Hire him and he may hate both you and the work. Love him too possessively and he is never weaned. Deny him too early and he never learns to love. Put him in cities and all his animal nature comes out with perversions of every good thing. For greed, acquisitiveness, violence were

so long his tools for jungle survival, that it is only by the hardest [effort] that these can be laid aside as weapons of his continued survival.

Now, if we worry about a Hitler or a Saddam Hussein, our first problem is that we haven't scratched ourselves - you see? Because, if you scratch yourself a little bit, you find most of the stuff there that is operative in Saddam Hussein. That's a tough word to hear. But it's true. Did you happen to catch *20 Minutes* last week? They aired one of the most gripping segments I have ever seen. A Jewish psychiatrist, 50 years after the Holocaust and the horror of that Nazi Death March of the Jewish people, brought the children of some of Hitler's henchmen together to talk for the first time since the end of the war. The children of the Nazi leaders, people now in their 60s, 70s were gathered to speak of their feelings and memories - the son, for example, of Martin Boermann and some other persons whose names I didn't recognize. It was very moving. Martin Boermann's son was I think a lad of 8 or 9, or maybe 14, when he had to come to terms with the fact that his father was a monster. Well, not a monster, but a human being who could sing hymns as well as organize the Death Camps. The son of Boermann converted to the Catholic faith and became a priest. I suppose he is living out his life as an atonement. There was a woman, I don't know her name, who was moved to weep as she spoke of her fear that there might be something in her own genetic make-up that would emerge of the awful monstrosity that emerged in her father. Here they were 40-50 years later, human beings like you and me, sensitive human beings, feeling all the weight of that past.

It is a tough word to receive that God has mercy even for the Hitler's and Saddam Hussein's. Just ask Jonah. Saddam Hussein is not the only person who has persecuted God's people. There was the King of Nineveh, that gravely wicked city! Next to Nineveh, New York City is the jolly Big Apple. God saw the wickedness in Nineveh. Don't get me wrong. It is not that there are not terrible, evil deeds perpetrated by the likes of us and by our brothers and sisters. God doesn't like it. So sometimes God sends a preacher. He said to Jonah, "Things are rotten in Nineveh - go preach. Tell them to repent. Tell them that I, the Judge of all the earth, demand that they turn around in their tracks."

Nineveh was east. Jonah hopped a boat west. He didn't want any of that preaching to Nineveh, because Nineveh was the enemy. The King of Nineveh the capital of Assyria, the oppressor of Israel, the decimator of the North Kingdom, the enemy, the adversary on the horizon. Let Nineveh go to hell! Nineveh conjuring up judgment for itself. "Ah-h-h, I can hardly wait," says Jonah. God says, "Go preach to Nineveh." Jonah says, "No way. I know you. I'll preach. They'll heed. They'll repent, and you will forgive. No way!"

So off to Tarshish he goes, in the direction of Spain. A little Mediterranean cruise, if you please. But, of course, the Lord God was not to be outfoxed by the likes of Jonah, and so God blew (phew) a little bit of wind. The sea turned. A shipwreck was imminent. All the sailors began to pray to their gods. The captain found

Jonah down in the hold of the ship asleep, drugged on his own anger and hostility. He said, "Hey man, get up and pray, if ever you've prayed. The situation is desperate!" And then they cast lots to see who might be the cause of this storm, and sure enough it fell to Jonah and Jonah said, "Yup, it's me. It's me. I am running from God." And they said, "What should we do?" And he said, "Toss me over." And they did. And the sea calmed - and all was fine. Jonah, going down into the depths, got swallowed in the belly of a whale. And there, amidst the digestion juices of the big fish, he had a little time to contemplate the call of God. Then God, feeling perhaps the prophet had finally gotten the point, God tickled the belly of the fish and he burped Jonah up on dry land, safe and sound, and said, "Would you like to go to Nineveh?" (Laughter)

And to Nineveh he went. And he preached. And it was just as he said. They heeded. They repented. God forgave. And Jonah was so angry. God said, "Do you do well to be angry, Jonah?" "Yes, I do well! I knew what would happen. You are so soft. You are just a teddy bear. Just let people give a little inkling that they are turning to you, and you just open up your arms. Yes. And it makes me very angry!"

So he went off and found the Pacific Palisades hotel, which overlooked the city. He thought he would see what was going to happen. Perched on a hillside, he built himself a little booth for shelter (it was a hot climate). God looked down and said, "Plant. Grow-big-fast." The plant towered over the booth with shade. Jonah was happy as a lark. He thought he was poolside. The next morning God says, "Worm, eat the plant." The plant dies. The sun beats down, mercilessly. Jonah can hardly stand it. God says, "Good morning Jonah. You're angry. Do you do well to be angry?" "Yes, I'm angry!" says Jonah. God replies, "Jonah, you're angry because a plant that you didn't plant, didn't nurture, grew up overnight and withered in a night. Jonah, how do you think I feel about the hundred and twenty thousand *people* in Nineveh, to say nothing of the *cattle*?"

Now the parable of Jonah was told in the Post Exilic period after Judah came back from Babylon, came back from its exile experience. It was during this time that the Pharisaic Movement began - the separated ones who began to gather their skirts around them in righteousness. They punctiliously followed the law, the rituals, said their prayers, did everything that they were supposed to do as recorded in the prayer of the Pharisee of last week's sermon. The righteous ones. The good ones. The serious ones. And as that society developed in a kind of narrow meanness of heart and spirit, somebody told the parable of Jonah. They told it in order to remind Israel, in its exclusiveness and narrowness, its nationalism which translated also into a kind of particularism of religion - God is bigger than that. God has mercy on all people. But Pharisaical particularism had become a dominant view in Jesus' day, so it was to that group Jesus had to constantly defend himself. It was to that group that he had to vindicate the Gospel he proclaimed, as well as the behavior of his life. It was to the murmurers and the grumblers that Jesus had to constantly defend the fact that he received

all sorts of people. In his home synagogue in Nazareth he gave an inaugural sermon. They almost killed him because he indicated that the Grace of God was broader than the limits of Judaism.

Jesus reflects that word of God, as shown in the parable of Jonah. It is in that context that he tells a story of a man who owned a vineyard, who went at 6 o'clock in the morning to the labor union office to find who was eligible for the day. He negotiated a contract with a bunch of workers and sent them out into the field. Twelve hours a *denarius*. "Is it a deal?" "It's a deal." Such a deal! Full day's work - full day's pay. Honest wage for honest work. Everything fair and square. At about 9 o'clock in the morning on the way to coffee he saw a few more standing idle there and he said, "What are you guys doing?" And they said, "Well, we're available." "Well," he said, "get into the field and I'll make it right with you." No written contract negotiation, no wage established. Just "I'll do right by you." At 12 o'clock the same thing. At 3 o'clock the same thing. At about 5 o'clock he was making his last pass and he saw a few more still standing there and he said, "Where have you guys been?" They said, "Well, the time before when you came we were in the 'john'." (Laughter) They didn't say that, but they probably were, because *they* really didn't want to work, *they* wanted to be able to go home to their wife and say, "There was no work today." He said, "Get into the field."

So they worked for an hour and, when it came time to dole out the pay for the day, those who worked for an hour got a full day's wage, and so did those who came at 3 o'clock, 12 o'clock, 9 o'clock and 6 o'clock. And those who were hired at 6 am and had worked a whole day and had worked under the sweat of the noontime heat, when they got the same wage as those who came at 5 pm, they were angry. Wouldn't you have been angry? Be honest now, wouldn't you have been angry? Every normal human instinct in you should rise up and say, "That's not fair. That's not just." And that's true. The owner of the vineyard said, "Look. Did we negotiate? Have I lived up to the contract? "Well, yes but. . ." "Am I not able to do what I wish with what is mine? Do you begrudge me my generosity? The anger that you are feeling is the anger that Jonah felt when wicked Nineveh repented and found Grace."

What is the image of God in this story of Jesus? Let me suggest this to you, that God is a promiscuous Lover. Do you know the word promiscuous? I didn't say are *you*? I said do you know the word? (You should have laughed a little bit!) (Laughter) The word is usually identified with those of somewhat less than moral scruples. Do you know what the word means? Its root is in Latin. *Miscere* which is to mix or mingle. Promiscuous is to mix or mingle indiscriminately. That was the charge against the vineyard owner. That's what makes people angry about God. God does not discriminate. God is indiscriminate. In the bestowal of God's gifts, God's Mercy, God's Love, God's Grace flows indiscriminately, mixing and mingling, with those who have some claim upon it, and those who have no claim upon it. God does not distinguish in the way we do, between those who are

worthy and worthless. Valuable and valueless. Good and evil. Black and white. With God there aren't good guys and bad guys. God is promiscuous.

And this made a Jonah angry. It made the religious leaders in Jesus' day angry. And it still makes the church today angry.

Listen to an interesting twist on the story told by Jesus. This is a true story recorded in the Jerusalem *Talmud* in about the year 350 A.D. Thus it is later than Jesus' story, and so probably either working off the same story that perhaps had general circulation, or maybe an actual twisting of the same story of the vineyard owner.

A rabbi, aged twenty-eight, died. He died on the day that his son was born. He was a very worthy rabbi. And so the rabbi's colleagues gathered for his funeral. One of his colleagues gave the funeral oration, in which he told this similar story. Similar but with a twist. He said there was a householder who went out and engaged laborers for the day. As he observed their labor he saw one man that was tremendously industrious, competent, capable and fruitful. And after two hours of work, he went to that man and he said, "Come with me. Let us walk and talk today." And so for the rest of the day they carried on conversation, walking and enjoying one another. It came the end of the day and the time for the pay, and the man who had walked with the master all day long after working only two hours got the same pay as those who labored all day. Those who had labored said, "Why should he get a full day's pay, he only worked two hours?" And the householder said, "Because he did more in two hours than the rest of you did all day long." In the funeral oration the rabbi said, "God took our young brother early because he was more fruitful in his short life than many gray-haired scholars who live a whole lifetime."

Now do you catch the twist? Do you see how the rabbi turned Jesus' story on its head? In Jesus' story the ones who went to work at 5 o'clock received a full day's wage. And there was absolutely no justification for it. It shattered all conception of reason and justice and fairness. When the rabbi told the story about his brother, he had said, "Maybe God took him young, but it was because he was so worthy."

There are only two options, two worlds described in those two stories. In Jesus' story, it is a world of promiscuous love, grace and mercy on behalf of a God who does not seek to justify such promiscuous ways. In the rabbi's story there is perfect justification because the reward follows the merit. In the story of Jesus, God is a God of promiscuous mercy, grace and love who refuses to justify these ways, who simply says to those who complain, to those who are angry, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" And if we would be honest we would say, "Yes. Yes, God we begrudge your generosity. We don't like that about you, and we don't like a world that is run that way."

Let me twist the knife one more time. Jesus told the story to vindicate the Gospel over against the Pharisees, the Jewish leaders of the day. But, by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, we've moved two or three decades down the line, and those Gospel writers wrote and selected their stories for a reason. What they wanted to do was not simply tell this story about something that happened back there. They wanted to speak to the Church to whom they were writing. Now the story in Matthew's Gospel is addressed not to the Pharisees; it's addressed to the Church.

It's so easy for us to read our Bibles and say, "Oh those bad Pharisees," and, "Ah, give it to them Jesus!" Oh no. Jesus had to tell the Pharisees. Matthew had to tell the Church. And I have to tell the church. I've got to tell you. If you have *heard* this story, you don't like it. If you *heard* this story you can understand Jonah's anger. Because this story says that God does not play fair. And the straighter you are, the more righteous you are, the more serious you are, the more industrious you are, the more you will be offended by God's promiscuity. You simply won't take it sitting down.

This matter is so important because it is our image of God that influences our behavior. It is our image of God that shapes our spirit. And if our image of God is not the image of Jesus, then we are going to be reflecting something quite foreign to the Jesus whom we claim to follow.

Shall I make it concrete for you? Let me give a contemporary example. Now I'm not a politician. I could never make it. But if I were a politician, and if I were a Republican, I would be extremely nervous about the inroads that the religious right is making into the Republican Party. Here is a paradox for you. It is fundamentalist Christian people that are influencing a political party and that are making a political party mean-spirited and divisive. It is Christian people. If I were a politician, and if I were a Republican, I would tremble before the prospect of Pat Robertson and Pat Buchanan setting the agenda for my party. If I allowed them to set the agenda, to take over, then the party of Abraham Lincoln would be no more.

The spirit that they are spewing out is the spirit of Jonah, who gets very angry with all of the sinners out there and wants to draw nice clean lines between those who are worthy and those who are not, those who are right and those who are wrong. They would be terribly offended at a God that could be promiscuously gracious - across the board.

Now - I've said it. Do you do well to be angry?