

The Problem with Bananas

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

One of Gary Larson's "Far Side" cartoons is of a bearded man standing at his front door, dripping wet, his clothes in shreds. His wife opens the door, looks at the disheveled, bearded man with disgust and says, "For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slime, smelling like a fish. And what story have I got to swallow this time?"

The story of Jonah's is hard for a lot of people to swallow, but it's a parable of God's grace, and it's worthy of our attention this morning.

The back story to our lesson this morning is well known by those who attended Sunday School growing up. God comes to a man named Jonah and tells him to go to Nineveh, a wicked city, and "cry against it."

But Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. He hates the people of Nineveh. So he went in the opposite direction and boarded a ship bound for Tarshish. Tarshish was about as far away from Nineveh as you could go in the ancient world. Jonah fled because he thought he could escape "the presence of the Lord." He thought he could go somewhere where God was not.

What Jonah didn't understand is that there is no way to escape from God. It's like church people who act one way in church and a different way at the office - as if God can only see them in church and not at work. They think their misdeeds are hidden and that they're safe. But they're wrong.

We've all heard sermons before on the futility of running from God. Yet we all do it. We don't have to board a ship or head for a distant port. We run from God with our minds and hearts. We tune God out. We ignore the voice that gave us life, the one that calls us to service.

There's no place that God is not, but Jonah still tries to flee. And when he does, the ship that he was on encounters a vicious storm and is tossed about on the waves like a toy. The storm is so fierce that seasoned sailors begged their gods for mercy. Finally they cast lots in order to determine with whom the gods were angry.

And the lot fell on Jonah, who confesses that he had displeased God by seeking to flee from His presence and said to them "Throw me overboard." Scripture tells us that the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of that fish for three days and three nights.

And then, when the big fish can no longer stomach Jonah, it "coughs" him up on dry land - alive and well. Which is where the Lord comes to Jonah again and told him again to go preach to Nineveh. By now Jonah is in no mood to argue, so he goes to Nineveh and preaches a one line sermon without even mentioning God's name.

"Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And something amazing occurs. "The people of Nineveh believe in God." They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth - all of them, from the greatest to the least. The king, too. He dressed in sackcloth and issued a decree of total surrender to the will of God.

That's impressive. I mean, anytime you get a politician to repent, you've accomplished something. Jonah's revival was an amazing success. Every sinner had repented. Every heart was changed. You'd think that a preacher would rejoice in such a great victory.

But not Jonah. He was upset that God had changed his mind about destroying Nineveh. He was so upset that he asked God to take his life. He was so angry he literally wanted to die.

So Jonah goes to a hill overlooking Nineveh to watch what God will do. God makes a plant sprout up near Jonah to shade him while he pouts. And the plant pleased Jonah immensely. But the next morning, God sent a worm to attack the plant so that it withered and died.

Then God caused the hot east wind to blow and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so hard that he fainted. And when God had Jonah's attention again, God spoke to Jonah asking him if he was angry over the plant dying. Jonah answered that of course he was.

And then, in two of the most important verses in the Bible, God says "You've been concerned about this vine, though you didn't tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

What a magnificent story. The lessons, of course, should be obvious, the first of which I've already noted: there is no escape from God.

Here's the second lesson: **God's love is universal.** In fact God created a rainbow of different people and loves each one of them!

I was reading recently about bananas. You heard me right. Bananas. (I know what you're thinking, "Preacher, you're bananas!" And you may be right). But much of the world's bananas are of the Cavendish variety, which is endangered by a strain of Panama disease.

Truth is, bananas may soon become extinct. Here's the problem. The vast majority of banana trees are virtual carbon copies of one another. In other words, the modern banana lacks genetic diversity.

And because of that, any parasite or disease that strikes one banana tree has the potential to wipe out the world's entire supply. The fruit is threatened by its uniformity, and it's uniformity makes the species weaker. Same holds true with people: the more uniform we are the more at risk we actually become.

You see, most of us feel threatened by those who aren't like us. Whether it's the color of their skin or ideas that run counter to our own or their outlook on life that's just plain strange, diversity makes us uncomfortable.

While variety may be the spice of life, most people just plain prefer life bland. Because those strange people with their strange ways of doing things perplex us.

God created diversity. On purpose. Because diverse people have diverse gifts. Especially in an economy such as ours where we need diverse people with energy, ambition and different ways of thinking.

God's love is universal, even when ours is not. Hold on, you say: who or what groups of people don't we love? We're Christians – we love everybody. We don't love those who make us the maddest; who do things differently; who think in odd ways.

Republicans; Democrats; conservatives; liberals; people who think they know everything; people who we think they know nothing; people who question everything;

people we find questionable; liars; cheaters; tax evaders; fundamentalists; ex-husbands; ex-wives; brothers; sisters'; them-those-they... the list goes on.

I gotta believe that if God is willing to love me - in spite of my meanness, in spite of my weakness, in spite of all my stubborn self-righteousness - then who am I to hold those same things against someone else?

Better I confess my sins than keep track of yours. Only it's hard to stay focused on my shortcomings while I'd rather stay focused on yours. Especially when your shortcomings are hurtful to me.

Because staying angry with you is how I protect myself from you. Refusing to forgive you is not only how I punish you; it's also how I keep you from getting close enough to hurt me again, and nine times out of ten it works.

It's that tenth time that I still struggle with. It has a name, a label, that has a serious side effect. It's called bitterness.

Last point: God's grace is sufficient for all. Which is the truth of the New Testament: that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." You see, we're all dependent on God's grace even when we don't think others deserve it.

Jonah finally came to learn that he could not flee from God's presence. And he learned that God loves everybody: Jews and Gentiles, Iraqis, Russians, Chinese; the people of Nineveh, the people of Israel, the people of the Gaza Strip. We all belong to one great family for whom Christ died.

I only hope that, as Jonah thought and nurtured his hatred for the people of Ninevah, he came to realize that God's grace was sufficient for him, too.