

“Don’t Fence Me In” - God

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I chose to speak today on the Old Testament lectionary rather than the Mark text because this second half of the Jonah story is a real eye-opener into the nature of God. I remember seeing the Jonah and the Whale story presented on flannelgraph by my Sunday School teacher - we kids were more entranced by the idea of a fish swallowing a person than the lesson she presented about disobeying God’s will. But today’s lectionary enters the story AFTER Jonah is ejected from the whale and what happens next between him and God presents us adults with a bit of an epiphany about God.

For the second time God directs Jonah to go to Ninevah, the capital of Assyria and prophesy their destruction unless they repent from their ways. He is still reluctant - not like the disciples in today’s gospel who just dropped everything so willingly to follow the command. And to be fair to Jonah, we can hardly blame him for being reluctant - the Assyrians were a brutal occupying force that had destroyed Israel’s northern kingdom and held Judah in slavery for almost 100 years, committing horrendous atrocities on the Israelites. Going to Ninevah to announce to them God’s judgment sounds like a suicide mission.

But he does go - steps just inside the city and gives the shortest prophetic proclamation ever - repent or God will destroy you in 40 days - amounted to just 5 words in Hebrew! But, remarkably, his message is wildly effective - the king and his people repent of their offenses complete with sackcloth and ashes. BUT, instead of Jonah being relieved and happy - he is MAD! He never wanted the Assyrians to repent - he did not want God’s grace to

extend beyond his own “chosen” people. It was great that God had just given him a second chance - but these people? He rails against God saying “I just knew this would happen. I’d declare judgment on these sinful people and You would change your mind and call them to You” - God asks “why should I not be sorry for the great city of Ninevah with its hundred and twenty thousand who don't know their right from their left?” Jonah didn’t get it - he stays mad at God. And what do WE say about this? How can there ever be justice in the face of such mercy? Shouldn't people be held accountable by God?

Of course God holds us responsible for our actions just as any loving parent would – and, as with the Assyrians, he also requires contrition and atonement. But what Jonah could not accept was the wideness of God’s mercy to extend beyond the Israelites to a nation he considered undeserving.

It’s the same conundrum we see in Jesus’ teachings about God - the prodigal son parable- the workers in the vineyard parable -Christ’s encounter with the Samaritan woman. God’s grace often seems unfair to us - upside down - it doesn’t fit with our narrow self-righteous vision -

In reading this story, I was immediately reminded of a recent phone conversation I had with a friend. We had a mutual friend who was dying. This man was an agnostic at best - as a former alcoholic he recognized AA’s concept of a higher power but that was it - no form of religion, prayers, the Bible for him - but this man had turned his life around 180 degrees since his days as an alcoholic. He worked personally with many people in AA to help them through their addiction - as a former Vietnam vet who suffered PTSD, he was active in his combat vets group guiding other guys

through it - his home was a haven for children and troubled teens - and his generosity to folks in need was well known

But in this phone conversation, my friend told me it was my “Christian duty” to talk to him about receiving Jesus as his Savior before he died - that he would surely go to Hell if he did not. After a couple deep breaths I said that the God I have come to know will welcome him home as he is - that the loving care this man had showered on so many in his life mattered more to God than any deathbed conversion. - and besides, who are we to speak for God anyway?

She told me I obviously did not believe in the Bible and quoted me John 3:16. At that point I brought the conversation to a quick end by telling her that it is not for any of us to put boundaries on the grace and spirit of God. That is just what Jonah was doing - trying to set aside God’s grace for just the Israelites, the “chosen” - and God made plain to him that his Spirit cannot be fenced in - it is way bigger than that.

Unfortunately we do not live in a world that acknowledges the omnipresence of the Holy. We live in a world that likes to relegate things of the Spirit to organized religion. And religions have been all too eager to claim God’s Spirit for their exclusive use. We think we can contain it and manage it to suit our agendas.. We have forgotten that God’s Spirit comes in many disguises - it is everywhere and lives in every living thing if we could just open our eyes and minds to it. Robert Frost may have thought “good fences make good neighbors” but we can see from today's Jonah story and from Christ’s teaching that God does not agree - especially when we try to fence Him in.

So what difference might it make if we broadened our conceptions of God and His grace? - if we focused on the “big picture”?

Our world is tribal - we are sadly divided into countries who feel they must compete for power - even now when our planet faces a global climate crisis and a global pandemic we can't seem to find enough common ground to work together- even though our children's future depends on it. We are narrow-minded and very short-sighted -what if we could remember that ALL of us- in every country, in every faith, in every social strata - are God's beloved?- might we see that we are hurting ourselves when we hurt each other?

The popular slogan in our country has been "America First" - really? Many people along the full political spectrum seem to like it - But what does "America First" say about us - what would Jesus say about it ? Oh, yes -he did say that in God's kingdom "the first shall be last and the last shall be first".- Ouch! Our new president has been criticized for being "too global" - is that such a bad thing, to consider actually valuing and working with other countries?

Needless to go into all the ways our own nation is so pathetically and dangerously divided - how sad is it that we can't even seem to agree on something so simple as whether to wear a mask or not - a simple, common courtesy to protect each other from a killer virus - something that takes just two seconds to do - political allegiance has taken precedence over allegiance to God's command to care for each other.

It all is so overwhelming and often seems like an impossible task to make any positive change in our world. But that does not excuse us from abandoning the task. As always, it can only be done one person at a time. Even if we only affect a tiny corner of our world - add up the corners and we just may be surprised.

It's tough work - it means we must remind ourselves that even people that make us uncomfortable- who do things we don't like - are loved by God. I

thought of this as I watched the angry mob desecrate our Capitol, beat officers with American flags and carry Jesus banners. I may hate their white supremacist and anti-semitic ideologies and I may condemn their actions and I want them held accountable - but I also must remember that they will never be beyond God's redemptive love - and maybe, if I really take a closer look, I might see why. Maybe, when I look at them as individuals rather than a mob, I wonder just what must be missing in someone's life that would make them vulnerable to such hate-filled ideology. This is hard - it is counter-intuitive -but so God often is.

It means I have to unlearn some of my assumptions- we all look at life through different lenses - lenses that have been colored by what we have been taught as children, our social network, our life experiences. I was raised to believe that Christianity was the only true religion , but when my spiritual path took me to a UU church and I met Buddhists and Muslims, I saw that we were all on the same journey - just taking somewhat different cultural pathways. It means I need to take a second, broader look - maybe reach out and engage with people who make me uncomfortable.

It means I need to be humble - that I just may be wrong. I may work for justice but I am not the Ultimate Judge. As the Benedictines say - "It is not for us to live the life of others or to understand the infinite forces at work at every instant of another's life. "Be kind - everyone you meet is carrying a heavy burden".

The Jonah story is a great Epiphany story - it reminds us that Christ came into the world as a light for ALL people - that His grace cannot be fenced in by our narrow parameters of what our culture labels as truth - that we are called to be open to diversity, fresh ways of thinking, and to that wonderfully wild, unbinding and forgiving grace that is the universal Spirit of God.

