

“JONAH: IV - LOVE UNLIMITED”

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Jonah 4

When I was a child, I loved to read stories with happy endings - like Cinderella finding her Prince Charming, and Little Red Riding Hood making it to her grandmother's house safe and sound. I liked it when the good guys won and all was right with the world, every problem was solved, and everybody was happy.

Who doesn't like happy endings? It just feels good when everything ends up well, things are the way they should be, and the good guys win. It happens so many times in the Bible - when children who have run from their parents return home to open arms, when the lost are found, when people are redeemed and start a new life - and of course, the biggest happy ending of them all - when Christ rises victorious from the grave! The Bible is full of happy endings all over the place. Why, there's hardly a day you can come to church without hearing about a happy ending.

I'm sorry to say that today is not one of those days. There is not a happy ending to the Book of Jonah - at least as far as Jonah is concerned. I hope that most of you have learned a little bit more about Jonah than you knew four weeks ago when this sermon series began. You know now that he was a reluctant prophet who didn't want to do what God asked of him, tried to go to the ends of the earth to avoid it, was turned about by God, and then finally, he relented, and went to Nineveh and did what God asked of him - preached to the people and told them that if they didn't repent, they would perish.

And lo and behold, they listened to him. They actually listened to Jonah, and believed him, and did what he told them to do. They actually repented, turned away from their evil ways, and turned to God. All of them - the whole lot of Ninevites - led by their king! It was incredible - and at least as far as Nineveh is concerned, it was a happy ending! They repented, God forgave, and God did not destroy them, rather gave them a chance to begin again. Talk about a happy ending - for them at least . . .

But not for Jonah. Jonah was miserable - absolutely, positively miserable. It's not that he couldn't believe that Nineveh repented, and it's not that he couldn't believe that God forgave them (because all along, Jonah knew God would do that - that's one of the reasons he didn't want to prophesy to them in the first place - he

hated them, and didn't want them to be forgiven). No, Jonah was miserable because God actually did it. He didn't think the Ninevites were worthy of being forgiven. Frankly, he would have preferred that God blow the whole blooming place apart - that would show those evil Ninevites!

Jonah is so mad about it, that he yells at God, basically saying, "See God, that's why I didn't want to go to Nineveh, that's why I didn't want to prophesy. I knew you would do this!" It wasn't fair - Jonah thought it just wasn't fair that God should love them like that.

How tragic that Jonah ended up that way - resenting God's love and forgiveness for others. How tragic that he couldn't rejoice that a whole city full of people could bow down before God and ask for forgiveness. How tragic that he couldn't be happy that they were being given a chance to start over. How tragic that he was so concerned with comparing them to those he deemed "holy" - people like him.

It is a tragic story, and I'm sorry there's not a happy ending to the Book of Jonah. And I wish that the tragedy of his story didn't continue in so many ways even today - but you and I know that it does. I talked to someone just this week who said he had had a discussion with someone about who was worthy of being saved and who wasn't - and just what are the conditions for salvation - or are there conditions for salvation.

You see, it's something that humans have wrestled with since time began - comparing ourselves with others, ranking ourselves in terms of who's more holy and more worthy, having opinions on who God should forgive and who shouldn't be forgiven. Oh sure, in theory, we should be happy when an evil person repents, but too often we question whether God should treat that person the same way as God treats a pillar of the church, for example.

One pastor talked about his own personal struggle with this. He said, "I must confess that there are times when I feel for old Jonah. I am so very happy that God is merciful and gracious to me and to my wife and daughter. I am eternally blessed that the Lord has undying love for my friends and family. But - there are some folks who come to mind now and then that I wonder about. There might even be one or two I can't figure out what God could love about them." (On-line, [lectionarysermons.com](http://lectionarysermons.com), "The Phone's Ringing")

Friends, I think that every time we think like that, it grieves God. I think God grieved over Jonah for so many reasons, not the least of which was that he didn't think God's love was big enough for everybody, and that he couldn't rejoice over others' salvation.

And I know it grieves God when we put up those barriers too - those barriers that say who's worthy and who's less worthy and who's not worthy at all, those barriers that put conditions on God's love and grace.

I read a very touching story this week that I think illustrates so well God's care for all people - especially those shunned by others. One day a plane was flying from South Africa to London, England, and a very fashionable British lady boarded the plane, and made her way to her seat. When she got to her row, she looked up and saw a black man sitting in the next seat, and he was speaking in an African language to someone near him.

The British lady said to him, "I'm sorry, are you in the right seat?" He smiled and said yes. She turned around to see if there were any empty seats in that section but she didn't see any, so she tugged at the sleeve of a passing flight attendant.

"As you can see," she whispered to the flight attendant, "I'm sitting next to a person whose skin color is different from mine."

"Yes ma'am, I can see that."

"Well," the proper lady said, "this is simply unacceptable. Is there another available seat?"

The flight attendant looked at her strangely and said, "I'm sorry, madam, it's against our policy to move people unnecessarily."

"You don't understand," said the wealthy woman, "this arrangement will not do. I have funds in my purse to arrange an alternative."

The flight attendant said, "You do?"

"Yes, I do. Will you please go up to first class and see if there is an available seat? I simply cannot sit next to this person."

So, the flight attendant shrugged her shoulders and walked up the aisle. A few minutes later she came back. She leaned over the wealthy British woman, tapped the man with the African accent on his shoulder and said, "I'm sorry sir, I hate to do this. I must make a seating change. If you follow me, we have a place for you in first class." (On-line, "When God Repented," Rev. William Carter)

Oh dear friends, there's a place for everyone in the arms of God - everyone who turns to Him and wants a new beginning - everyone - no barriers, no distinctions, no more worthy, no less worthy - everyone who turns to Him and

wants a new beginning. As the old hymn says, “there’s a wideness in God’s mercy.” God’s love is unlimited. It’s wide enough to embrace reluctant prophets, repentant Ninevites, African travelers, British aristocrats, prodigal children, lost sheep - and you and me.

Friends, may we never be like Jonah - resenting who God chooses to love and forgive. Rather, may we give thanks that God’s love is unlimited, and may we rejoice whenever someone turns to Him - for that is always a happy ending. Thanks be to God!

Amen.