

“Cattle of Nínive”

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University Church of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

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- after the 7th anniversary of 9/11 with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,
- in the aftermath of Hurricane Ike,
- a week before the special collection for the CC (Doc) Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation Ministry, and for
- a congregation that needs to recognize its internal wounds, honor its histories, and (re)envision its future

Call to Worship (Psalm 145:1-8)

One: We will extol You, our God and Ruler, and bless Your name forever and ever.

All: Everyday we will bless You, and praise Your name forever and ever.

One: Great is Adonai, and greatly to be praised; God’s greatness is unsearchable.

All: One generation shall laud Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts.

One: On the glorious splendor of Your majesty,
and on Your wondrous works, we will meditate.

All: The might of Your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and we will declare Your greatness.

One: They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

All: Adonai is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:11 (inter-lingual reading by Gloria Vicente and Amanda Ruch (in italics))

Al ver Dios

When God

lo que hacían [ellas y ellos de Nínive] y cómo se habían arrepentido de su mala conducta,
saw what they [of Nineveh] did, how they turned from their evil ways, God

Dios

changed God's own mind about the calamity that God had said would be brought upon them;
se arrepintió si mismo también y no los castigó como los había amenazado.
and God did not do it.

no, {both read at the same time}

no los castigó.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. Jonah became angry because
a Jonás esto no le gustó nada, y se enojó. Se dirigió a Yavé

He prayed to the LORD

y dijo:

and said, "¡Ab Yavé! / O LORD!, {both read at the same time}

¡Ab Yavé!

O LORD!

es exactamente lo que yo preveía cuando estaba todavía en mi tierra,

Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? In my own country.

En mi tierra.

That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning;

y por esto

for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and ready to relent from punishing.

Yo sabía que tú eres un Dios clemente

gracious

y misericordioso,

merciful,

paciente y lleno de bondad, siempre dispuesto a perdonar.

and ready to relent from punishing.

Tú eres un Dios clemente y misericordioso, paciente y lleno de bondad,

you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,

siempre dispuesto a perdonar,

ready to relent from punishing.

y por esto traté de huir a Tarsis.

Oh Yavé,

And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Oh Yavé, ahora es mejor para mí morir que vivir.

Oh Yavé, te ruego que tomes mi vida, pues."

And the LORD said, "Jonás, ¿crees tú que tienes razón para enojarte así?

"Is it right for you to be angry?" Yavé le contestó.

Then Jonah went out of the city [of Nineveh] 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.

Pero Jonás salió de Nínive y se hizo una cabaña al este de la ciudad,

para ver lo que sucedería a la ciudad.

Entonces Yavé,
the Sovereign God,

*hizo brotar una planta de ricino que creció por encima de Jonás para dar sombra a su cabeza
y así calmarlo de su enojo.*

The God Adonai 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.

Jonás se alegró mucho por la planta. Pero al día siguiente,

But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush,
so that it withered. When the sun rose,

God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah

Pero al día siguiente, al amanecer, Yavé mandó un gusano que malogró la planta y la secó.

Al salir el sol, Yavé hizo soplar viento caliente desde el este.

El sol acaloró tanto a Jonás que éste se desmayó. Se deseó la muerte,
so that he was faint and asked that he might die.

He said,

y dijo: "It is better for me to die than to live."

He said, "Mejor es morir que vivir."

Entonces Yavé

But God

Entonces Yavé le preguntó:

But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?"

"Te parece bien enojarte por este ricino?"

And he, Jonás, said, "Sí, angry enough to die."

"Yes, tengo razón para estar enojado hasta el punto de querer morir," respondió.

"Sí, tengo razón!"

"I have reason!" "I am right!"

"Sí, tengo razón!"

Then Yavé le replicó: "You are concerned about the bush?"

Te afliges por un ricino?

a bush which you did not labor and which you did not grow;

un ricino que no te ha costado trabajo alguno y que no has hecho crecer,
que en una noche ha nacido

it came into being in a night

y en una noche ha muerto

and perished in a night. And should I, God, not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city,
in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons
who do not know their right hand from their left,

*¿Cómo, pues, yo no voy a tener lástima de Nínive, la gran ciudad, donde hay más de ciento veinte mil personas
que no saben distinguir el bien y el mal,*

should I, pues, not be concerned about Nineveh, so many people, miles de personas
hundreds of thousands of people who do not know

so many persons que no saben

they do not know como distinguir el bien y el mal, how to tell good from evil,

their right hand from their left,

right from wrong,

so many personas... y gran cantidad de vacas!

and also many cows!"

Sermon

Despite the stereotype of dumb bovines who subscribe to a herd mentality (which often leads to slaughter), we who live in a post-1871 Chicago should know better than anyone else the damage that even a single cow can cause. This university would not have a phoenix rising from ashes on its crest and we would not have a church building on the cheaply sold land of Marshall Fields' former countryside estate. Whether we like it or not, we, all of us, in some form profit from the pain of others past and present. This is not a matter of feeling guilty but rather, as our reading from the book of Jonah tries to teach us, this is an issue for people of faith, to reconcile this awareness of structural injustice in the world in which we live with the direction of our pity and pain that we have received.

Now, there are a couple of different directions many congregations will go with the lectionary reading this morning. One on hand, our more confessional friends might want to read this story as a message about the need for conversion. If only the sailors in the first half story, the people of Nineveh, or even Jonah were better believers and had more trust in God, then divine judgment and wrath wouldn't be warranted. So, like the ancient city of Nineveh located in present-day Iraq, more people in the world – especially in the Middle East – should confess their sins and turn to Christ and to be spared the current reign of divine justice through *our* “coalition of the willing.”

One the other hand, other Christians much like many of us here this morning, will want to note that this story does not really refer to the historic Nineveh of Assyria because the historic Jonah probably lived nearly 150 years before the destruction by the Babylonians of this large, aggressive city north of ancient Israel (around 612 B.C.E.).¹ Therefore, we might like to say, this sinful Nineveh is not referring to the ancient city but really to any large, aggressive empire in the north which tramples upon smaller southern neighboring states. We, in the U.S. – social justice

¹ 2 Kings 14:25: “He [Jeroboam II (ca. 786-746 B.C.E.)] restored the border of Israel from Lebo-hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher.”

Christians might conclude – are the present-day Nineveh who should heed the words of warning coming from present-day prophets in the smaller nations upon which we trample. But neither of these two understandings of Jonah’s tale gets it right... or wrong; or as God states in the end, neither fully knows its right hand from its left.

I have a close friend who grew up in Texas peace-and-justice congregations who recently started attending a Lutheran church. When he told me of the Lutheran church that he and his wife had found he ran down the list of how it was almost everything they were looking for in a congregation: solidarity and advocacy ministry with undocumented migrant workers in the area, a vibrant children’s ministry, an wholistic church education program, and a theologically rich pastor who wore cowboy boots and in a single sermon would quote Martin Luther, Jacques Derrida, Nelson Mandela, and then Willy Nelson.

“Well,” I said, “have fun listening to a message about ‘grace’ every week.” “What do you mean?” he asked. “I mean,” I clarified in one of my less ecumenical moments, “that I study and worship with a lot of Lutherans in Chicago and hear them complain that if a sermon doesn’t end on a note about grace then it just isn’t a ‘sermon.’ They can be kind of a one-trick-pony, like Southern Baptists saying that every sermon has to end by pointing to the cross, et cetera.” “Nooooo,” my friend rebutted.

A few months later I got a fairly angry phone-call from my friend: “You’ve spoiled it for me,” he said. “Spoiled what?” I asked. “My new church. The preacher will be going along with a witty, tight, and profound sermon, and then, right when I’m at the edge of my pew he’ll rhetorically ask: ‘and so what am I talking about? that’s right... grace!’ It’s done. You’ve ruined it. I now know the punch line of all his sermons.” In all honestly, I wonder how many of us in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ have bred our own one-trick-pony called “peace-and-justice;” they’re a “grace and mercy” church, we’re a “social justice” church. And I think it is precisely these types of one-trick-ponies that the book of Jonah, with all its cows, is trying to redress.

As it is an often told story, we can easily remember that it begins with God calling upon Jonah to arise, go, and proclaim God's judgment upon the great, foreign city of Nineveh. However, ironically, unlike other books of the prophets which contain the sayings of those prophets, the book of Jonah has him saying very little. More ironically, in contrast to so many of the standard prophetic accounts – which begin with God commanding prophet X to arise, go, and proclaim, followed by the line that prophet X arose, went, and proclaimed – rather than arising, going, and proclaiming, Jonah's tale begins with him arising and fleeing. Rather than going east toward Nineveh as God commands, Jonah heads in the exact opposite direction, to Tarshish, possibly in present-day Spain, at the western end of the known, ancient Mediterranean world.

Jonah heads in the direction of the descending Sun in the lower bawls of a sailing ship before pleading with the sailors to be thrown over down into the stormy sea to only descend further into the belly of large fish which swims down to the bottom of the waters and into the depths of the underworld. This physical descent parallels Jonah descending further into himself in an attempt to refuse to allow God to turn his heart and to care for anything more than himself and his own nation. Despite his silence for almost three quarters of the story, we finally hear in the part we read this morning as to why he resisted God's call. Unlike other biblical prophets who typically resist God's call because they consider themselves to be unworthy of such a vocation, Jonah's concern is that if he proclaims God's wrath to those of Nineveh he, Jonah, will then give the Ninevites that chance to repent and ask for God's mercy thereby letting them escape divine judgment and true justice. And he is proven almost correct in these exact fears and suspicions.

And it is this discernment *of* and tense relationship *between* divine justice and divine mercy or grace that is exactly what is at the core of this story and what is necessary for understanding the difference between our right hand from our left, right from wrong, and good from evil, and eventually a sense of integrity and healing from pain and feelings of loss. Jonah protests that he has reason and is right to demand God's justice from the injustice caused upon his nation of Israel by Nineveh. And there

is nothing in the story or elsewhere to say that Jonah is wrong on this account. Just as the book of Job attempts to explore why bad things happen to good people, the book of Jonah is attempting to explore the corollary: why good things happen to bad people.

And we can best see this tension between divine justice and divine mercy in the book of Jonah through the story's precise use of its references to the divine. On one hand Jonah, throughout the story, calls upon the divine name as established on Mt. Sinai, the sacred name for the God of justice which Judaism still considers too holy to pronounce and only writes as YHWH and renders as *adonai* in the Hebrew, "the LORD" in English, or as "Yavé" in our Spanish reading.² However, on the other hand, both the sailors of Jonah's ship in the midst of the storm and the citizens of Nineveh call not upon "the LORD" but rather upon the God of mercy which appears in the original Hebrew not as *adonai* but rather as *'elohim* or simply rendered as "God" in English and "Dios" in Spanish. And by the story's end, when the divine speaks for the last time, the narrator makes it clear that it is "the LORD God" who speaks, as if to say that the God of justice and the God of mercy is one and the same.

It is not that Jonah does not know this. He is not ignorant but rather in his poutiness stubbornly obtuse, choosing to only emphasize one facet of the divine over the other, choosing to plead for justice at the exclusion of mercy, choosing to stress that he is right rather than recognize a greater righteousness, choosing to limit his concern for only those that are within his nation, his ethnicity, his language group, his church, his clique, himself and thereby only stressing the *particular* covenant that God made on Mt. Sinai with a *specific* people at the exclusion of the more ancient and enduring covenant that the LORD God also made after the Flood to love, bless, and behold *all* peoples and *the whole* of creation. Jonah has chosen to only focus on his anger, loss, and pain and thereby directed his pity almost completely unto himself and his tiny patch of shade.

² "God" is *'elohim*, the God of mercy, while "the LORD," *adonai*, or YHWH is the God of justice, as noted by R. Shemuel bar Nahman, *Genesis Rabba* XXX:3 in Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts* (Oxford, England: One World Publications, 1998), 148, n. 6:3.

Despite God's call to build a just community of grace, Jonah wants to decide who belongs and who does not. But rather than personal characters (human or angelic), God uses elements of creation or "dumb nature" – such as a storm, a big fish, a bush, and a worm – to turn the direction of Jonah's pity, as well as that of the story's readers, around and radically outward. And the people respond by turning around all that they are and all that they have, including their own use of "dumb nature" such as their cows. They turn their community around to such the degree that they can then listen to and learn from those upon whom they have trampled.

As James Cone, a founder of Black Theology, has said, evil is not merely unmerited suffering but that in this world that we have created some peoples unmeritoriously suffer more than others.³ Justice is the redress of this inequitable distribution by ensuring that people get what they deserve. However, for us of the church, social justice should not be the goal or end-game but only the bare minimum of the beginning. As the church, we are called also to be advocates of a social mercy or grace, not charity understood secularly as mere donations out of our surplus but rather a charity or *caritas* understood as divinely-rooted love for all. We need both social justice and social mercy. This biblical notion of charity, mercy, grace, or *hesed* in the Hebrew, calls for us to go above and beyond the laws and social norms of our time.⁴

On one hand, to only focus on grace and mercy can leave us as the church deaf to the true pain of others and ourselves and thus to calls for a truly righteous and divinely-rooted social justice. In this way, those who only advocate mercy as forgiving-and-forgetting become apologists for a *status quo*. On the other hand, to only focus on social justice, at the expense of a call for social mercy, will leave the church, our church, indistinguishable for any other drop-in or social service center, and in the long-run truncate any efforts for the establishment of the Kingdom, or to use John Calvin's more democratic term, the Holy Commonwealth.

³ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 152.

⁴ As found, for example in Genesis 43:14; this term is only one Hebrew word often translated as "mercy" or "loving kindness" and does not actually appear in the book of Jonah.

The error of Jonah, many of our churches, and those of us who would only direct our pity narcissistically onto our pain – or worse yet chose to ignore our pain altogether – rather than use such feelings of hurt and loss to relate empathetically with others directly in our midst and in the wider world, the error here is not only to not properly distinguish between justice and mercy but to not see how they go hand in divine hand. As Thomas Aquinas clarified love, especially divinely-rooted love, is not contrary to or exclusive of justice but rather it perfects justice. Without the chisel of social justice in one hand and the hammer of social mercy in the other, any attempts to carve the Holy Commonwealth out of our world will only be short-sighted and shallow scratchings.

May we as part of the universal Church, especially a particular congregation in a period of transition and transformation, not be silent or narcissistic but recall and properly redirect our senses of loss and pain, honor our histories, and begin to rebuild community with the tools and insights of social justice and grace... or run the dangerous risk of just being one more cow among the God damn herd.⁵

Benediction

So, akin to the words of the gospel of Matthew (20:1-16):

Go now and take what belongs to you,
knowing that God, and God alone,
chooses to give to the last the same as have been given to you.

For God, and God alone,
is allowed to do what God chooses with what belongs to God.

Be not envious because God is generous
but rather be gracefully generous
because God is not only *graciously just* but also *generously merciful*.

And do not return anger for anger, evil with evil, injustice with vengeance,
but rather be fearfully aware of the prophetic assurance
that “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

⁵ Suggested future reading, Miguel A. de la Torre, *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethic of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2007).