

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
 God loves our enemies.
 Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17, 3:1-10, 4:1-11
 Opening Hymn: Eternal Father, strong to save 325
 Choruses: Days Of Elijah (Mark) & Mighty to Save
 Closing Hymn: Amazing Grace 670
 Time of Remembrance: O Canada
 Steve Filyk
 November 10, 2024
 Communion Sunday

Following Jesus comes with an obligation to forgive others.
 We recommit ourselves to this obligation every Sunday
 When we say the Lord's Prayer together.

"Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

And just in case you think you've found a loophole,
 "I don't owe anyone money",
 You should know that Jesus
 isn't just talking about finances.

After teaching his prayer to his disciples
 [in the Gospel of Matthew]
 Jesus adds the following words:

"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you,
 your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
 But if you do not forgive others their sins,
 your Father will not forgive your sins."ⁱ

When it came to forgiveness
 Jesus practised what he preached.

The Gospel of Luke records Jesus forgiving his executioners:

"When they came to the place called the Skull,
 they crucified him there, along with the criminals—
 one on his right, the other on his left.

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them,
 for they do not know what they are doing."ⁱⁱ

So do you practise forgiveness?
 In most of our everyday living
 Forgiveness isn't an impossible challenge.

We can find enough charity in ourselves
 To overlook the slight
 or forget the lack of consideration.

But what do we do when the wounds are open
 And the trauma is deep?

PAUSE

Today we have read an abridged account
 Of the story of Jonah.
 We skipped over his song/prayer
 From the belly of the whale.

Jonah stands out in Scripture as a rather humorous tale,
 And not just because it involves a big fish.

There is just so much irony...
 So much unexpected behaviour.

The main character is a disobedient prophet.
 Prophets are supposed to listen to God.
 But when God tells Jonah to go right,
 He turns left.

But it isn't just that Jonah disobeys God.
 Jonah doesn't seem to like people.

Jonah sleeps while the boat he hired is close to capsizing.
 Later he sets up camp outside of Ninevah
 Hoping to watch the city burn.

By contrast, the pagan sailors
 Show great concern for Jonah,
 Trying to row him to shore,
 And only reluctantly tossing him into the water.

By contrast, the people of Nineveh,
 Listen to God's voice, proclaiming a fast
 And turning away from their evil.

Jonah isn't a sympathetic character.
 Even when he decides to do the Lord's bidding,
 It is only because he feels forced into it.

When it is confirmed that God will indeed
 Relent with God's plans of judgement on the city,
 Jonah complains that he'd rather die
 than live in a world where God offers such grace.

Given all of this irony
 (alongside that big fish story)
 Some scholars regard this story as a piece of historical fiction.

But this creates other problems.

Jesus talks about the sign of Jonah
 As an event located in history.ⁱⁱⁱ

The book of 2 Kings also places Jonah

within its historical chronology.

Jonah is described as a prophet from the region of Galilee
Who was active during the reign of Jereboam II.

Accepting a real historical location for the prophet
May help us understand this problematic character.

Placing Jonah during the reign of Jereboam II,
Situates him during Assyria's conquest of their neighbours,
Perhaps twenty or so years before their first raid into Israel.

This tells us that God had sent Jonah
Into what he would consider enemy territory:
Nineveh was a provincial capital in this empire.

And what history tells us about the Assyrians (confirmed in his story)
Is that they were a people
Who were extraordinarily violent.

You may want to cover your ears for what I am about to tell you.

Let me read for you some of the boasting
of Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II,
Who reigned a hundred years earlier,
Whose stories would have been known by Jonah
And the people of his land:

"I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me
[and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses];
some I spread out within the pile...

"I felled 50 of their fighting men with the sword,
burnt 200 captives from them,
[and] defeated in a battle on the plain 332 troops. ...

With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool,
[and] the rest of them
the ravines [and] torrents of the mountain swallowed.

I carried off captives [and] possessions from them.
I cut off the heads of their fighters
[and] built [therewith] a tower before their city.
I burnt their adolescent boys [and] girls."

"In strife and conflict I besieged [and] conquered the city.
I felled 3,000 of their fighting men with the sword ...
I captured many troops alive:
I cut off of some their arms [and] hands;
I cut off of others their noses, ears, [and] extremities.
I gouged out the eyes of many troops."^{iv}

These stories which the Assyrians used as propaganda,
 Would have been known to Jonah's people.

So what if Jonah knew these stories?
 Even worse what if Jonah had friends or family
 That had experienced this very violence?

How would Jonah ever truly be able to forgive?

In the end, Jonah was reluctantly obedient.
 He eventually did what God had asked him to do.
 But how would he ever get on board with God's plans
 For mercy and forgiveness.

It is clear from the story that he doesn't want the people
 Of Nineveh to be shown mercy.

Jonah actually complains when they repent:

"Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home?
 That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God,
 slow to anger and abounding in love,
 a God who relents from sending calamity."^v

Jonah has a problem with forgiveness.

And the God who chased after Jonah with a storm,
 And save him with the whale,

Tries to reach him through an object lesson
 Of a vine that grows up to provide shade
 And then wilts so the sun blazes on Jonah's head.

God uses the vine to show Jonah the inconsistency in his compassion.
 Jonah is deeply upset about losing the plant,
 a temporary source of comfort
 that he did nothing to create or nurture.

Yet, he has no compassion for the people of Nineveh,
 whose very lives are at stake.

God contrasts Jonah's pity for the plant
 with God's own compassion for Nineveh,

a city of over 120,000 people and animals who are
 "unable to tell their right hand from their left"
 (that is they are morally and spiritually ignorant).

So does Jonah ever get to a place
 where he understands God's character
 and can forgive with his own heart?

We don't know.
 The story leaves us hanging.

The lack of a tidy ending
 Forces us to look at our own lives,
 And reconsider the bitterness we are holding on to...

How are we ever going to be able to forgive our deep hurts?

At our men's Bible Study this past week
 Corrie Ten Boom was mentioned.

Corrie was a Dutch Christian.
 Along with her family she helped many Jews
 escape the Holocaust during World War II.

They were eventually caught, and Corrie,
 along with her sister Betsie,
 was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp,
 where Betsie later died due to the harsh conditions.

After the war, Corrie travelled as a speaker,
 sharing her story and preaching about God's forgiveness.

One day in 1947, while speaking at a church in Germany,
 she encountered a former Ravensbrück guard in the audience.

In her own words:
 "And that's when I saw him,
 working his way forward against the others.

One moment, I saw the overcoat and the brown hat;
 the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap
 with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush:
 the huge room with its harsh overhead lights,
 the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes
 in the center of the floor,
 the shame of walking naked past this man.

I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me,
 ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin...

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out:

“A fine message, *fräulein!*
 How good it is to know that, as you say,
 all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!”

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness,
 fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand.
 He would not remember me, of course—
 how could he remember one prisoner
 among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt.
 It was the first time since my release
 that I had been face-to-face
 with one of my captors
 and my blood seemed to freeze.

“You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk,”
 he was saying. “I was a guard in there.”

No, he did not remember me.

“But since that time,” he went on,
 “I have become a Christian.
 I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there,
 but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.

Fräulein—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?”

And I stood there
 —I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—
 and could not.
 Betsie had died in that place—

could he erase her slow terrible death
 simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds
 that he stood there, hand held out, but to me
 it seemed hours as I wrestled with
 the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that.

The message that God forgives has a prior condition:
 that we forgive those who have injured us...

I knew it not only as a commandment of God,
 but as a daily experience.

Since the end of the war
 I had had a home in Holland

for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies
 were able also to return to the outside world
 and rebuild their lives,
 no matter what the physical scars.

Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids.
 It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there
 with the coldness clutching my heart...

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently.
 “I can lift my hand. I can do that much.
 You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically,
 I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me.
 And as I did, an incredible thing took place.

The current started in my shoulder,
 raced down my arm,
 and sprang into our joined hands.

And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being,
 bringing tears to my eyes.
 “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”^{vi}

PAUSE

Forgiveness from the heart may seem impossible.
 And may be impossible for you alone.

But remember these words from Jesus,
 “WITH God all things are possible.”^{vii}

Invitation to come forward after the service.

ⁱ Matthew 6:14-15 NIV

ⁱⁱ Luke 23:24 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ See Matthew 12:38-41

^{iv} Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II* (Wiesbaden, Germ.: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), pp. 124–127. As quoted in “Were the Assyrians exceptionally cruel & violent or were they normal for their time and region?” Quora, 8 Nov. 2024, www.quora.com/Were-the-Assyrians-exceptionally-cruel-violent-or-were-they-normal-for-their-time-and-region.

^v Jonah 4:2 NIV

^{vi} Boom, Corrie ten. “Guideposts Classics: Corrie ten Boom on Forgiveness.” Guideposts, 24 July 2014, guideposts.org/positive-living/guideposts-classics-corrie-ten-boom-forgiveness.

^{vii} Matthew 19:26 NIV