

Taizé Meditative Reflections
(20Sept2020)

Jonah 3:10-4-11 (part 1)

The silly slapstick book of Jonah gets it all backward.

Its start has God calling a prophet, just as God usually would. Prophets are often reluctant. But Jonah goes further backward, not just with reluctance but refusing the direction God intended, going completely the opposite direction, trying to get to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, the farthest possible known place from where God intends.

God, of course, catches up with Jonah. There's a storm on the boat. In a second reversal, it's the sailors who pray to God, with more faith than the prophet. They beg him to pray. Jonah won't, but instead throws away his life to drown.

Then there's the famous whale (or fish). The silly backward part I like is that God appoints this sea creature. It's one of four appointments from God, with the other three in today's reading. Rather than creatures given a special task, we think first of the prophet probably, or of humans generally being the ones chosen by God to do something special. In this story, God appoints a whale. God appoints a shrub and a worm. And God appoints a hot wind.

Where the human fails at doing what God wants, the other creatures follow through and obey God. Such natural righteousness of creatures shapes my beliefs. I still find it strange Saint Francis thought he needed to preach to birds when he probably should've listened instead. I believe I'm more of a sinner than my dog. But such may not always be true. Along with these appointed fish, shrub, worm, and windy characters in the story, I wonder whether Asian carp and buckthorn and jumping worms are doing God's will as they invade, much less the scorching Santa Ana winds that risk fanning awful flames in California.

There are some big sinners. Maybe humans specialize in sin more than others. Maybe we're not alone.

Whatever the case, it makes it all the more surprising how God reacts next.

Jonah 3:10-4-11 (part 2)

Forgiveness before confession?

That's not our normal rhythm in worship, and not how we expect these things normally work. You're supposed to say you're sorry, supposed to mean it. You may even have to prove your regret, that you feel bad and really own up to your wrong, your error, your mistake, your problems. Only then will you be forgiven...Maybe.

So how did we get to this point?

We left Jonah inside a whale. He gets yakked up on shore, which conveniently changes his mind about listening to God. But the silly backwardness doesn't stop there. He goes to Nineveh, the foreign capital. Enemy headquarters. He wades far into the middle of the city and delivers a one sentence sermon, able to be summed up in three words: Repent...or else!

They'd have no reason to listen to Jonah. Prophets (and preachers) are used to not being heard. God directly told Isaiah he had a message but the people wouldn't care. Jesus spoke woefully wishing people had listened. We heard a couple weeks ago that Ezekiel had to deliver his message, not because it might change the people, but because otherwise he'd be liable and accountable to God.

Well, Jonah didn't have the ideally receptive audience, but his one sentence sermon stuck, ricocheted through the huge city. From the king on down, it affected every person. Even the cattle listened and were repenting. (So maybe they *were* sinners?)

A typical preacher would be grateful or maybe even pleased with him- or herself for that success. But not Jonah. Jonah didn't want an effective message. He wanted fire and brimstone. Not to be reconciled with his enemies but for them to be destroyed. He didn't want to listen to God, but then those wicked irreverent skeptics listened and believed in God.

That's when Jonah really runs into trouble. He's stuck with a God who prefers mercy, love, life.

Jonah argues, accusing God: "I knew it. I just knew it. I knew you'd be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, just like you always are." It's a hilarious accusation. This scriptural refrain is a constant confession, and

everywhere else is filled with praise and gratitude and relief.

When it's about us, we want grace and mercy and love, to be spared any negative repercussions coming to us. On our own, it is good that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

But I'm a Jonah; I find myself wishing ill on Mitch McConnell, or not having to go on myself. We don't want God's grace for our enemies, for those who hurt us, for those we dislike. They should be forced to repent more severely and be threatened with the punishment we think they deserve. We don't want to see they are also created in the image of God, held in God's unconditional love, part of God's redemptive work. We get ready to exclude and condemn, either them or us.

What to do about this remains literally an open question at the end of Jonah. God asks, "shouldn't I be concerned about these moronic dimwits, the spiritual nincompoops failing so dismally to understand that the arc of the universe bends with love? And furthermore, what about the cattle? Won't somebody please think of the cattle?"

The question at the end of Jonah remains for us: will we adapt and repent of our punitive preferences? Are we ready to embrace God's broad concern for even repulsive humanity, plus the livestock? Or do we want to sit and skulk for eternity?

Philippians 1:21-30

We got a sense of Jonah's politics. And mine. What about Paul's? And what about yours? Do they match the politics of Jesus?

It's not just timely phrasing it as politics; the actual word is in this Philippians passage. We get the bland translation "live your life in a manner," where the Greek word is "*politic* yourself according to the gospel of Christ."

If we're stuck confessing that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, then what's our shape of relationships, our conduct and politics to match? How are our interactions affected by having this

love as our core belief for our lives and for the shape of the universe?

In Paul's case, this letter keeps reinforcing the commitment and joy of love. He's loved by God, so he can't help falling in love with others. His great pain is that he's not together with his congregation, a pain I relate to, the deep longing of missing you so much, wanting to be together.

Paul recognizes it's not all good, though. God's love is the best, and other stuff can be frustrating. Sometimes we think we can just be with God's love and avoid the rest, saying I don't need church, the fights or the gossip or bureaucracy or boredom or whatever. It would be better just to recline into God's love and promise, Paul admits. But if it really is love, then we stay and keep working. We do it together, committed even at a distance, because living is Christ. We politic ourselves like Christ.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg was striving to live at 87, for the important work for justice. In her Jewish faith, she wouldn't have said "living is Christ," but maybe we take some of the meaning in political effort, as we also strive for relationships near and far. It's how we politic our lives, living as Christ to love others.

Let's notice that's not just about tolerating differences. Love isn't just an attitude of what you put up with, but an action. In the run-up to the election, you might hear more from Lisa Hofmeister about the "With Malice Toward None" campaign that pledges not to hate, ridicule, or disdain those on an opposite side.¹ Though it's more than just good sportsmanship, this may be a way to do the difficult work of long-suffering love.

I invite you to spend sixty quiet seconds now to consider how you might like to practice the politics of love in this political season.

Matthew 20:1-16

Is this fair?

In the view of the American work ethic, it's not. A paycheck, we'd like to claim, is about getting what you deserve, what you've earned.

Of course, that's not how the economy actually works. Some get substantially more than they

¹ <https://braverangels.org/what-we-do/with-malice-toward-none/>

deserve, while others work terribly hard and still can't afford rent or health care or school loans. And, as in the parable, some want to work and at the end of the day are still waiting on the sidelines.

A broader perspective: in my background were two hardworking but poorly-compensated grandfathers who nevertheless were able to have some leftover as inheritance to be handed on to me. Partly from my white privilege, I was able to start the day not having to work as hard, not as desperate to earn, at unfair advantage.

So we shouldn't pretend the current system is really fair, and shouldn't presume that our way of doing things is better than God's way.

God is not interested in fair or what somebody allegedly deserves. God is abounding in steadfast love, interested in life, in helping each and every one to have what you need. Even those who seem lazy. Those who have been left out. Those who were evil sinners. The resentful. The cattle. That is God's concern.

And there's good news it's not too late. It's never too late. At the end of the day, God's work is still expanding.