

To Forgive or Not to Forgive?

Jonah is often remembered as a story about a reluctant prophet who ends up in the belly of a big fish. The passage that is our main text today, though, is much deeper than what we get in pop culture. Jonah contains a number of themes and the one we will focus on today contrasts mercy versus retribution.

From a historical perspective, the writing of Jonah is hard to date, but we know that this this story, or allegory, has been told for some time. It was in use by 200BCE because Jonah plays a major part in the holiest day of the Jewish year, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. By that date it was the universal Jewish custom to read the book of Jonah as part of the afternoon service. It is still used today during that holy day.

We will look at what Jonah teaches us about justice and mercy and how God's grace operates in our lives and in the world. We will examine how Jonah relates to our world today. We will see how this story shows compassion and forgiveness and teaches a lesson which we need to know as we take part in the community of Christ.

I studied history and political science in college. I enjoy relating historical novels to biblical stories. *Fail-Safe* is a 1964 thriller film which portrays a fictional account of a Cold War nuclear crisis. The film features performances by a number

of well- known actors, namely Henry Fonda as the President. During the early 1960s, Cold War tensions were high between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Berlin Wall had been erected in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 had taken the world to the brink of nuclear war.

Fail-Safe is set in the context of the nuclear strategy of the 1960s known as MAD, or mutually assured destruction. Both the United States and the Soviet Union designed their nuclear weapon arsenals so that if one tried to attack the other, the other would also be attacked and both countries would suffer massive destruction. The idea was that the fear of being destroyed would keep one nation from attacking the other.

At that time, the US kept several fleets of bombers constantly flying in the air as an immediate response to any potential nuclear attack on the country. Upon an initial alert, the bomber groups would proceed to “fail-safe points” to await an actual “go code” before proceeding towards Russian targets.

In the movie, through a series of mistakes by both sides, the system is not “fail-safe” and one of the US bomber groups makes an accidental nuclear attack on Moscow. Before completion of the attack, the President of the United States seeks a resolution to the matter that will avoid reprisal from the Russians and, ultimately, an all-out nuclear holocaust. The President orders one of the US bomber groups to

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attack New York City with nuclear weapons in the hope that it will appease the Soviets and avoid complete nuclear war. What makes the decision even more compelling and personal is that the President knows his wife is in New York City and will be killed.

The President's decision in *Fail-Safe* is consistent with a culture which believes in vengeance or retribution as justice. This belief goes along with the maxim "an eye for an eye." The President in *Fail-Safe* decided that justice was that New York City would receive the same number of number bombs that were dropped on Moscow.

In the book of Jonah, Nineveh is a large city which also faces destruction. This is because there is much evil in the city. God has employed Jonah as a prophet to tell Nineveh of its impending doom.

Is retribution or mercy the message that we receive from the scripture passage for today? Should we follow the American cultural idea of fairness as shown by the President in *Fail-Safe* or does Jonah give us another example?

In Jonah 3:10 God shows compassion and grace to the people of Nineveh by not destroying them. God changed his mind after they repented and turned from their evil ways. God's idea of justice was to show mercy. God also shows compassion for all nature in Jonah 4:11 when he asks Jonah why God should not

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be concerned about Nineveh with more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons and also many animals.

In Chapter 4 God's grace is contrasted with Jonah's anger. Jonah is angry that God spares Nineveh. Jonah becomes so upset that he prays that God take his life, for it is better that he be dead. Jonah does not show compassion for the people of Nineveh. He basically pouts and goes outside the city gate, builds a booth and waits to see what will happen to Nineveh.

God then decides to teach Jonah a lesson. God causes a bush to grow which gives Jonah shade and makes him happy. God then causes a worm to wither the bush and brings a wind upon Jonah which causes Jonah discomfort. Once again, Jonah is unhappy and asks that he might die. God points out to Jonah that he is only concerned about the bush because it gave him shade and really does not show any compassion towards its demise. Jonah had also not shown compassion towards what would happen to the people of Nineveh if the city was destroyed.

God asks Jonah a very critical question in v.4:4 "Is it right for you to be angry?" This question goes to the heart of what justice means. In chapter 3 Jonah had gone about Nineveh for a whole day proclaiming that the city would be overthrown. Now God had decided to spare the city and Jonah was mad that there would not be retribution. Was there any basis for Jonah's anger?

Jonah has traditionally been given an unfavorable treatment because he wanted retribution and did not show compassion to the people, but there are other views that hold Jonah in a more favorable light. Serge Frolov, a Jewish Russian national, who grew up in the Soviet Union after World War II, makes a point of justice, considered in light of the Jewish Holocaust, that maybe Jonah was justified in being angry because he thought God gave salvation to the wicked at the expense of the righteous. To allow all in Nineveh to live meant that the righteous there had to deal with the wicked not being punished, and the reality was that the people of Nineveh would be wicked again in the future.

In fact, Amy-Jill Levine, professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, points out the irony that, in Jonah God spares the Ninevites, but in the next generation, the same Ninevites would not spare Israel from conquering them and taking them into slavery.

Frolov's position is a minority one among theologians but it really speaks to how most people today, including Christians, deal with justice. Like the President in *Fail-Safe*, we believe that there should be equal damage to all. We have had to deal with 9/11 and debate whether there should be forgiveness or vengeance. We ask these questions today because of the great amount of tension and political strife present in our nation. People are having a hard time forgiving those who are the

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other side of the political spectrum. It has gone beyond just disagreeing. Families are split. Friendships have ended. Some are willing to take up arms to advance their beliefs.

The lesson for us today is that Jonah failed to appreciate God's mercy. True justice means that God exercises grace and does not exact punishment when it is due. Jonah also learned it was important to have compassion to know justice. God taught Jonah he needed to worry about people and not be focused on whether an edict or law was followed.

Jonah has a strong parallel to the New Testament parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. God is like the loving parent. Nineveh is the prodigal son and Jonah is like the Elder son who resents the merciful acts of the parent.

In the story of the prodigal son, the younger son takes his inheritance and goes off to a far land. He is foolish and squanders all his money on prostitutes and parties. He ends up living among the pigs and realizes he has sinned. He decides to go home and repent to his father. When he returns home, his father greets him with a hug and forgives him. The prodigal son, like Nineveh, does not get what he deserves but instead receives compassion from his father.

When the father has a great feast for his sinful son who has come home, the Elder son gets angry and refuses to enter his father's house. The Elder son boasts

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of his obedience and achievements. His father wants him to accept his brother back into the family, but this means he will have to forgive him. Like Jonah, we do not know what the Elder son ultimately decides what to do.

We come back again to the question “Is it right for you to be angry?” We often act like Jonah and the Elder son in our treatment of other people when we think they do not deserve forgiveness. We fail to remember that Jesus died for all and not just for those who behave. We have a hard time forgiving those who have sinned, especially those who have sinned against us. We have to be able to accept all sinners into the kingdom of God. Jonah wanted the people of Nineveh to be judged on merit, not on grace, but if we were judged on merit none of us would be saved.

We must remember that all persons have worth to God. The lesson we must learn from Jonah is that God’s grace is underserved but applies to all. As much as it might irritate us that someone is getting away with something, our goal is mercy, not retribution.

In the Jewish New Year, the themes of Yom Kippur are true repentance and divine forgiveness. When one focuses on the divine compassion of God towards the Ninevites, one finds reassurance about one’s relationship to God and learns compassion in relationship to others.

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In the United Methodist Church, we celebrate communion. We confess that we have broken God's law and we pray for forgiveness. We engage in a remembrance of Christ's death which atoned for our sins. Atonement means that we have been restored to our broken relationship with God through the life and death of Jesus Christ. This means we are forgiven. God showed grace to all humanity, just as He showed grace to the people of Nineveh. Through the shedding of Jesus' blood and the breaking of his body, we do not receive our due punishment. Because Christ died for all, we must learn from Jonah that we cannot resent God's gracious treatment of others we do not like or believe to be less than adequate. We must personally exercise grace and forgive anyone who has harmed us or caused us pain. Only then can we truly experience our restored relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

It is important to remember that the Ninevites did repent. We forgive all no matter what, but it is important that the one who sinned repent. Only in this way can true reconciliation occur. This means that the one harmed, even though they forgive, can insist that the sinner change his or her ways. However, that change cannot be a condition of the forgiveness. Forgiveness has to be unconditional.

Though forgiveness occurs, there still may be accountability in this world for one's actions. Although Jesus told the thief on the cross he would be with him

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in Paradise, the thief still died for his crimes. Although one may be forgiven for such horrendous crimes as child abuse by the victim, the perpetrator still has to go to jail for the crime. Many who engaged in the Holocaust were tried and convicted for their crimes. Some received capital punishment for what they did.

Jonah also teaches us that we have to forgive nations or groups of people we may not like. The Jewish Holocaust was a horrendous event and some like Serge Frolov, similar to Jonah's attitude, resent the idea of any forgiveness to those who carried out this destruction. Yet, the book of Jonah, and ultimately the death of Jesus on the cross, teaches us that we must be able to forgive all, as bad as they have been. What about those who flew the planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 9/11? What about the carnage from the mass shootings in the United States, including the killing of the Emmanuel 9 in Charleston by Dylan Roof? What about the storming of the US Capitol and the deaths that resulted? As horrible as these crimes were, we have to be able to forgive those who committed them. Unlike the solution in *Fail-Safe* our attitude is not to seek equal damage. We are made in the image of God, and part of being made in the image of God means we act as God acts. With Nineveh, God acted with compassion and spared it, even though it and its people deserved destruction. God has also spared us from eternal death, even though we deserved it.

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We only need look at the example of Jesus himself to see how we should act towards others. On the cross he could have called down the power of heaven, destroyed all on earth, and stopped his death. But he showed compassion and died for us. He said “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

Interestingly, his words echo what God told Jonah in v. 4:11 when God showed concern for the people of Nineveh and said they did not know their right hand from their left.

As we are part of the community of Christ, we need to have forgiveness and compassion in our hearts towards all other people, groups and nations. This attitude is the only way to truly receive forgiveness from God.

Let us now prepare to come to the communion table.