

Theme: Do you Pity Plants more than People?

1. The Plant that revealed Jonah's Grudge (Jonah's trust in the plant was indicative of his refusal to trust God's mercy - both for himself and for Nineveh)
2. The People that received God's Grace (The people of Nineveh produced "fruits worthy of repentance" and thereby showed that they had indeed received God's Grace)

During the Cold War, a man named Uwe Holmer applied for permission for his children, who lived in East Germany, to be allowed to attend university in East Berlin. Eight times he applied and eight times he was denied by Margot Honecker, the Minister of Education and wife of the East Germany premier. Why were the Holmer children denied? Well, in the Soviet Union, no reasons are given. However, the underlying message was clear. Uwe Holmer was a Lutheran pastor.

Not surprisingly, things changed quite a bit when the wall came down. Honecker and her husband were dismissed from office and put under indictment for criminal activities. They were evicted from their luxurious mansion and suddenly found themselves on the street, without friends. No one wanted to identify with them anymore, let alone help them, except the Holmer family. Pastor Holmer invited the Honeckers into his home where they stayed until they were able to get back on their feet.

Pastor Holmer surely remembered the words of Christ, "Love your enemies...". If you were in the same situation how would you react? It'd be pretty easy just to look the other way or to say, "Well, they got what they deserved." Many today would say, "See, karma strikes again." Those are all foolish thoughts, though; and completely foreign to God's grace in Christ. As strange as it sounds to human ears, the Holmer's welcoming response was the closest to the model of Christ.

Our lesson reminds us of another follower of Christ, who practiced the more natural reaction. We read from Jonah 3:10-4:11:

**Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.**

**4:1 But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. 2 So he prayed to the LORD, and said, "Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. 3 "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!" 4 Then the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" 5 So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city. 6 And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant. 7 But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. 8 And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" 10 But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. 11 "And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left-- and much livestock?"**

Most people think that Jonah's story is all about the great fish and that Jonah learned his lesson then. But, the end of his book, the words of our text, show that Jonah was still a work in progress at that point. In fact, we're never actually told if Jonah ever got past his grudge against the people of Nineveh.

One could hardly blame him. Nineveh was a major city of the Assyrian empire, dating all the way back to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10. The Assyrians were the barbaric enemies of God's people and the ones to eventually carry away the 10 northern tribes into obscurity. Unlike later nations such as Babylon and Rome, the Assyrians had no desire to assimilate foreigners into their kingdom. They would enslave the women and children and kill them men; often by very gruesome means. Some even believe that the Assyrians created the act of crucifixion, which the Romans adopted some 700 years later.

In no uncertain terms, the Assyrians were evil. Human logic certainly understands Jonah's grudge. He had probably witnessed a number of atrocities from the Assyrians first-hand, perhaps even to friends or relatives. At first, one may think that Jonah fled to Tarshish out of fear. That would certainly make sense. But, Jonah wasn't a coward. He was worried that the word of God might actually take effect and produce repentance in the Ninevites. He complains to God, **"Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm."**

We naturally wonder what Jonah was specifically getting at. Was it the Lord's forgiveness or the Lord's mercy that bothered him most? Maybe there isn't much a difference but it's possible that Jonah wanted God to forgive the Assyrians, yet still punish them. Haven't you ever felt the same way? You tell someone who wronged you that they're forgiven yet you still want them to feel some of the pain you felt. You want forgiveness because you know it's right, but you also want punishment. That could be how Jonah felt. Of course, it could also be that Jonah didn't even want God to forgive the Assyrians.

Whatever may have been the case, it was a problem; and it was creating a problem for Jonah's faith too. What God really wanted from Jonah was to show pity. We should define exactly what we mean by pity because it's often used in a different way in our culture. In our world, pity is looked at as sort of a condescending thing. We pity those who are weak and lesser than us. It's not typically used as an expression of the virtues of love and mercy. But, the idea in our text is much deeper. God was calling Jonah to much more than just feeling sorry for Nineveh. He wanted Jonah to show compassion. The concept of pity also means to spare from impending disaster. Jonah also summed it up well as he described God's pity, **"gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm."** True pity involves more than just how you think about the other person. It involves action, sparing disaster and judgment. What pity really is the end effect that forgiveness has on a long-standing problem or grudge. Pity resolves the situation by not just declaring forgiveness, but by showing mercy.

To teach Jonah about this, God used an object lesson. He created a plant to shield Jonah from the scorching sun. Anyone who has been in direct sunlight for some time knows what a relief shade is. How wonderful and blessed was this plant for Jonah. It was an indication of God's pity upon his servant, even though in the grand scheme of life it was quite a small matter. The following day, it was time for God to bring this lesson home to Jonah. He caused the plant to die and Jonah erupted in anger. Jonah's frustration over what was really a trivial matter showed his misplaced priorities and trust. Jonah cared more about himself. Jonah was concerned only of his life on this earth. And Jonah trusted in the plant for protection, not the God who created that plant.

God's ultimate message was clear, Jonah was sorry for the loss of the plant, but he cared next to nothing about the actual human lives at risk in Nineveh.

God's point here is not to run Jonah's name and reputation through the mud. He speaks to you and me too. How often have the day-to-day stresses of life set us off in anger and revealed our shallow trust in God. The electricity goes out and you can't watch your favorite show on TV or charge your phone, so you snap at your loved ones. You come home from work after a long and exhausting day only to have more chores to do around the house. Can't anyone else help out; don't they appreciate you? Your parents won't let you stay out with friends as late as you'd like and so you give them a glare and a cold shoulder. You find out that someone at church or work is talking behind your back so you shun them to send a passive aggressive message.

In the end, we all look back on those things and recognize how foolish they are. God would have us learn by asking ourselves what we pity more; the things that please us or the people that are important? By no means is it easy to do the right thing in the moment; we see the difficulty clearly in Jonah's life as he was willing to die at the loss of his shade. Part of the reason that God calls us to show pity is because it leads to a more fulfilling existence for ourselves too. If we measure the worth of our lives by how much and how often we get what we want, life will be pretty meaningless and petty. But, if we measure it in service to others and glory to God, it gives us much more self-worth and leads us to seek greater things.

But the greatest gain in showing pity is that it points to the highest offering that Jesus showed us. Here was a Man who did not seek anything for Himself, and ended up living the most fulfilling life ever. Not only was Jesus' life fulfilling in that He helped others, and pursued a high calling; but it was fulfilling in the Biblical sense too. He kept everything in our place so that we would have hope in place of our mistakes. If Jesus had not done what He did, no amount of service to others would ultimately mean anything. As Martin Luther so famously wrote in the hymn, all our works would be a "false, misleading dream."

Jonah was a work in progress. He needed to learn more from the Lord and the lesson was hard to accept. But, he was by no means the only one. Nineveh repented and was spared by the Lord. But roughly 50 years later they would march against Israel in war and subdue God's people. Israel had sinned. Assyria had sinned. Both deserved God's judgment. No one is ever perfect on this earth. There's always more grace we can and need to receive from the Lord. But, that doesn't mean we resort to excuses either. Each time we receive forgiveness from God it begins with repentance.

Jonah allowed his own self-righteousness to block out that forgiveness. Like the unmerciful servant in the parable of Christ, Jonah wanted to be in God's favor but he didn't want others to have the same opportunity. The problem was that his heart led to a foolish complaint before the Lord. For Jonah it was about a simple plant. But, in our lives, there are many things that can get in the way of our need for God's grace. What could be blocking repentance, grace, and forgiveness from Jesus for you? Sometimes it doesn't even have to be an object, it could be something immaterial like thoughts and priorities.

Remember why merciful compassion is so important; because that kind of pity leads us to value people over possessions. The merciful compassion shown to us by Jesus is what leads us to think of others over ourselves; just as He did through His life and death on the cross. Sometimes, it will be easy to show that compassion. People will admit their wrongs and you'll see positive changes in their lives. Those things make it easy to show pity. Most of the time, though, it won't be easy. People will hold onto their problems. They will act foolishly.

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They will hurt you. They will be childish; much like the way that the Holmer family in East Germany was treated.

In those moments most of the world will tell you that you have the right to act like Jonah did. But, you and I both know, believe, and confess that that's not the way we came to Christ, and it won't be a way for anyone else to come to Christ. True mercy, true pity in faith in Christ is what happens when a grudge is broken. It is the spoken forgiveness but also the love to move on from the problem. True pity, in the very same way we were shown by Jesus, makes no room for harboring feelings of anger. It moves forward in peace, joy, and love; deep-rooted fruits of the Holy Spirit produced in the good news of salvation. Go forward today in the peace of that forgiveness. Trusting and believing that God has shown you mercy in His Son, even though you didn't deserve it. And imitating that same mind as you shown mercy to others, even when they don't deserve it. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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