

Jonah, Jonah, Jonah.

Is there any more unhappy profit in the whole of human history?

I mean, yes, Moses is famous for saying,

oh, no, not me. I can't talk well, send someone else.

But Moses doesn't try to steal away on a ship,

jump in the ocean

and get swallowed by a big fish.

Jonah does.

God then speaks again:

“get yourself to Nineveh and tell those people to shape up!”

So Jonah goes,

and he tells them.

And, shock of shock,

they listen.

They say, oh, no.

We have been greedy and mean.

We have not taken care of the poor, and the orphan, and the immigrant

like we were supposed to.

We have forgotten that life is a gift,

we have forgotten that we are not the center of the universe,

we are not God.

And they repent,

from the King on down.

Jonah should be happy, right?

They listened to him.

This pretty much never happens, by the way.

Typically, the prophets are ignored,

especially by the kings and rulers.

Another crazy liberal running around telling us to take care of the poor,

or, in some cases,

another crazy zealot telling us to spend more time worshipping God.

Forget it,

get me another concubine and jug of wine.

But in Nineveh, they listen.

They repent and change their ways.

Jonah should be happy, right?

Nope.

When God decides to spare them,

Jonah is pissed.

He wanted the sword of righteousness to fall down on their heads.

He wanted them to pay.

He had a whole story in his head,

one he would tell when he got back home.

He'd gather his friends around the table,
and they'd all lean in close,
and he would tell the tale:

how God had called him to preach repentance,
and how he had gone to the land of the wicked,
and called out,
but they had refused to listen, and persecuted him for righteousness' sake,
and then he had shook the dirt off his shoes at them,
and cursed them,
and has he walked out of town,
God had rained down fire and shook the earth,
and sent plagues of wild animals and stinging bugs,
and wiped those sinners off the face of the earth,
and only if they had listen to wise and brave Jonah,
they would have been saved.

And all his friends would have praised him for his courage
and righteousness,
and Jonah would have been proud.
That was the story in his head.

But instead, what?
Is he going to go back and say,
I told them to be nice and they said, oh, you're right.
We'll do that right now.
Really? Where's the drama? The conflict? The moral of the story?

You ever had a story like Jonah's in your head?
About how you were going to tell someone they were doing wrong,
and they didn't listen,
but then they got their comeuppance,
and came to you and said, oh, you were right,
will you ever forgive me for doubting you?

You even get a story like that in your head?
I do, so I bet you do too.

I think to myself, I bet I can prove those doubters wrong.
Show I really do know what I'm doing,
and then they'll apologize and thank me for being such a great person.
I think that sometimes, I admit it.

I bet you do too.

Maybe with a spouse or lover –
maybe with your children, be they grown or not yet.
I bet you've had that thought about a coworker,
a boss,
maybe a friend.
Maybe you've thought that way about a politician.
Maybe you've even thought that way about me once or twice.

What does your insurance company tell you, if you get into an accident?
Don't say you are sorry, because that says, "you were right and I was wrong."

What do politicians do?

Never admit an error, because you don't want anyone to think the other guy is right. There is even a formula for the apology/non-apology:

"Yes, I could have been more accurate about my record, but my opponent is even more wrong about his plan to raise your taxes and abduct your kittens."

But it does feel a little good, doesn't it?

When someone says to us,

"gee, I was wrong and you were right. I'm sorry about that."

And we get to be magnanimous, and say,

"oh don't worry about it."

We feel good about these moments.

We feel – yep – righteous.

Justified.

I don't know why we are so good at thinking in black and white.

Right and wrong.

Good and evil.

I don't know why we are so good at it, but we are.

Maybe we think the clarity will help us decide how to live,
or some such nonsense.

I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Augustine's Confessions,

so I know this story of the pears,

to which Bill Neely refers, quite well.

Augustine, poor soul, tortures himself:

why would I do something so horrible,

to steal them for no reason,

why?

And he thinks in good and evil, in black or white, in all or nothing:

he, Augustine, is clearly depraved, as all humans are by original sin,

while God, to whom he needs to apologize,

to ask forgiveness,

God is all good.

It is our need for forgiveness which proves God's righteousness,

and it is, in Augustine's schema, Christ's act of forgiveness for our sins
which confirms the rightness of the Christian faith.

And if God is righteous, and we need his forgiveness,

then the conclusion, under such doctrine, is that we are wretched.

Sinners from the start.

I must tell you,

this idea makes me weep.

So much pain, so much hurt, so much self-mutilation and self-denial,
has sailed out into the world under this flag of despair.

Sometimes we err, it's true.

Sometimes we make mistakes.

But please.

Come, my young, anxious friend.

Take these pears from my orchard.
Gifted to me, my gift to you.
For you are not depraved.

Won't you take one to one who hungers –
as Rosalinda takes a lemon to the thief,
who is not, first, "thief" but is, before all else,
"brother who hungers."
Won't you take one to one who hungers,
and offer from the fullness of your heart?

Jonah, bless his confused prophetic fearful righteous heart,
Jonah never really understands.
He thinks that the moral of the story is supposed to be about the people of Nineveh.
But, no, this story isn't about Nineveh.
It's about Jonah.

It's about forgiveness and second chances.

First, Jonah doesn't want to go,
so he hops a boat, and God sends a storm,
and Jonah apologizes to his shipmates,
and plunges into the water.

Why doesn't God just let Jonah die?
He can't swim, it wouldn't take long.
That would show everyone that they had better do what God says the first time.
But no, God rescues Jonah with the big fish,
who keeps him safe and takes him to shore.

You'd think Jonah would get it –
God forgives, gives another chance.
God doesn't send Jonah to Nineveh to show the evil hearts of the Ninevians.
He sends Jonah to learn how to forgive and let go and begin again in love.
But Jonah doesn't get it.

So God makes a metaphor.
Metaphors are always a little off,
and this one is a bit hard to parse.
Perhaps the bush, which makes Jonah happy,
is like Jonah's deserve for violence and punishment,
and is taken away by the worm and the wind.

A more common interpretation is that the Bush,
which makes Jonah happy,
is like the people and animals of Nineveh,
who make God happy, so long as they are healthy;
the worm and wind which make Jonah unhappy
would be like God's wrath visited on Nineveh.

Or, maybe, God's mercy is like the bush,
providing shelter,
and Jonah should not begrudge God's mercy
when it is offered to someone else

if he wants any for himself.

The point of this sermon isn't an exegesis of Jonah, Chapter 4,
just to say, then, that it seems to me that there are difference ways to
ask for and offer forgiveness.

Jonah longs for the storm-cloud, listens in vain
for the rush of the whirl-wind and the fire-rain.

He can accept their apology, but only if they pay the price can he even think about forgiveness.
Jonah cannot forgive unless he is proven righteous.

Augustine sees his teenage foolishness as a sign of cosmic depravity;
he seeks forgiveness, not for his own single act of greed,
but for the state of his fallen soul,
for something someone else did at the dawn of time.
He wants God to bring him peace, assurance of restoration,
the knowledge that he is saved by faith,
Augustine cannot forgive unless God makes him righteous.

But there's another way.

When the gray-haired New Englander sees round his board
The old broken links of affection restored;

The links of affection restored,
when family, friends, pilgrim and guest,
are seated 'round the table—the board—together.

Forgiveness without righteousness.

Rosalinda doesn't forgive the thief so she can show that she's a better person than he is.
She forgives him because she sees who he really is,
and loves him and his family.

The gray-haired New Englander doesn't forgive those round his table
so that he can be lord over them:
he does it, and they do it for him.
so that they can be together in affection again.

The forgiveness which is beautiful and good,
the forgiveness which begins again in love,
the forgiveness which sets us free from the pain of the past,
done by us or to us,
this forgiveness is not done for the sake of proving who was right and who was wrong,
it is not done for our glory,
it is not done because it is what is expected of us,
or because we think it will bring us acclaim in the public sphere,
no.

The forgiveness which is beautiful and good
is done for the sake of the relation between us,
for the love between us,
for the covenant, the friendship, the affection,
that is or was or might yet be between our souls and bodies and lives.

The farmer who feeds forgives young Augustine
because he wants him to love the pears, love the trees and their blossoms,

love the lover for whom he might take those pears,
cut them in slices, dip them in honey, and share them.

God forgives the people of Nineveh for the same reason,
in this story, that God forgives Jonah:
because growth and life is more beautiful than pain and death;
because God is Love.

We are in the midst of the Jewish High Holidays –
Rosh Hashanah, the new year, was last week and Yom Kippur,
the day of atonement, is this coming Friday night and Saturday day.
On the New Year, an accounting of your deeds, both the good and the bad and the in-between, is made.
But that accounting is not “sealed” until Yom Kippur,
and by that day, you can make amends, restore what is asunder,
ask for and offer forgiveness.
Second chances, new beginnings, starting anew,
it is built into the sacred calendar of Judaism.
There is no original sin –
no sense that we are broken from the beginning –
in Judaism.
Instead, we are human.
We strive and hope and love and get confused,
and we try again, and are generous and troubled,
wondering and holding fast, wounded sometimes,
able to heal,
human.
Nothing we do makes us so evil that we cannot be forgiven.
Nothing we do makes us so righteous that we are never wrong.
We are human.

It's one of the preacher's favorite clichés, but it is still a good one:
Atonement,
break it out: at – one –ment.
The point of apology and forgiveness is not to show who is right and who is wrong,
who is better and who is worse.
The reason for the Day of Atonement and the reason we ask for and give forgiveness
is because it mends what is torn
and restores us unto each other,
renews the bonds of affection
which make life good, worthy, and beautiful.

There is a kind of forgiveness which separates:
I, who forgive, am greater than you.
God, or Christ, who forgives, is better than the sinners who need it.

That is not the kind of forgiveness I want to practice,
and it is not the kind for forgiveness our faith calls us too.
We believe, we practice, we work on the forgiveness with brings together;
which lays aside in love the hurts of the past
so the present, and the future, can begin.
We believe, we practice, the forgiveness that reminds us that we are all brothers and sisters and cousins,
that nobody is always perfect and nobody is forever broken,
so we keep trying, keep trying together.
We care less about (punishing ourselves for) the joy of sinning slightly

and more about the joy of living fully.
The feast of life is laid before us,
and we believe, we practice the forgiveness that makes
all, pilgrim, guest, welcome at the table.

We believe, we practice, the forgiveness which is born not of greed, but of love.
May that spirit of love,
that spirit of compassion,
that spirit of unity,
be in us in this season of beginnings, of restorations, of thanksgivings, and of life.