

Unjust Desserts – A Communion Meditation
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Jonah 3:1-4:4 Jonah is my kind of prophet. Reluctant, withdrawn, moody, stubborn, and not quite ready to leave the comfort of his hometown.

And that's a problem. Because all over the Hebrew Bible, when God speaks... people get up and go. Abraham and Sarah move out on a promise and a prayer. Moses heads for Egypt with nothing but a shepherd's staff. Elijah travels far outside his comfort zone and winds up trusting a foreign widow.

But no, not Jonah! When God says "Go!" Jonah stands on the dock with a ticket to travel in the opposite direction.

He wanted to get as far away as possible. Nineveh, the Assyrian capitol, represented the enemy camp at its most powerful and wicked. No Jew would want to lift a finger to help them. In the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., it was the Assyrians who led a Holocaust against them of sorts, nearly wiping his people out of existence, plundering and looting and burning their cities and deporting Israel's inhabitants. There was some BAD history there. (By the way, guess what Ninevah's modern name is? MOSUL!)

Anne Lamott famously said "*You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.*" It's true that we all have our enemies. For Jonah, it's Ninevites. Who is it for you?

Jonah had allowed his politics to drive his theology, rather than his theology drive his politics. He was a man of gentle prejudice, not actively discriminating against his audience, just not thrilled at being sent to redeem them. He doesn't think his time spent with those Ninevites will be worth it. But his God sent him to love and witness to these people – even though he saw as enemies, undeserving of grace, and just didn't want to.

But, as it turns out, Ninevite Lives Matter.

God was persistent and asked Jonah a second time, so off he goes, reluctantly dragging his feet all the way. When he arrives in the middle of the city, he gives what might be the most passive call to transformation anyone has ever heard. All the while, he is half-hoping that no one will listen so his God can finally level the city with his mighty wrath, and give them their Just Desserts.

Somewhat unpredictably, the entire city of 120,000 people, including the king and curiously, many animals, repent. And they are spared.

It's just so unfair! Jonah gets angry and walks off in a huff to pout about it, because he never could quite understand the wideness of God's mercy. And he remains a tragic character to the end.

Before I continue... be honest... who wants to be me right now, preaching to you on practically the eve of another contentious presidential election?

This grace and forgiveness thing can be super hard to do in a regular week, not to mention right now! We know we are called to go and love our brothers and sisters, but then we turn on a TV, or scroll through our Facebook feed, and we see in each other anything but a family resemblance!

Instead we see rednecks, bleeding hearts, racists, elitists, idiots, criminals, enemies, people who have it coming—Ninevites!!! And we don't know what to do with our anxiety, repulsion and fear.

This election, which has dragged on for eternity and a week, has divided us in so many ways. The current tenor and tone of our conversation is brutal and unforgiving. There has been an embarrassing level of acrimony, threats and finger pointing. And it leaves little room for any of us to come together and work ANYTHING out. We no longer have anything in common with our neighbor who voted for "the other one" ... and, well, they may as well be living on another planet.

And yet... Jesus blessed peacemakers, and called his followers to be salt in a decaying earth, and light in a dark and divided world. He gave an identity to them, saying, "*Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.*" He taught that the greatest commandment is to love God and others as oneself.

Jonah saw those in Ninevah as people who deserved whatever problems came their way. They were “the other”, living outside God’s love. In the gospels, the Pharisees did the same thing:

When they noticed Zacchaeus in that tree, all they saw was a tax collector;

when the paralyzed man was lowered through the roof, they just saw someone getting in the way;

when they witnessed the Samaritan woman at the well, they just saw an outcast;

and when they observed the thief on the cross, they just saw another sinner getting what he deserved.

But, when Jesus looked upon the same people with justice and mercy colored glasses, he named them quite differently:

Zaccheus became the brother who was far away but who had now come home;

The man lowered through the roof was a friend who once had no options but now has a future;

The Samaritan woman at the well became a sister who had been pushed to the margins, now pulled into the heart of community;

And the thief became a brother who had once done wrong and suffered the deepest brokenness, yet was ultimately forgiven and welcomed into paradise.

Honestly, I know that your conversations with people this election week will tempt you to forget everything I have said about following Jesus’ model of forgiveness and mercy... maybe you will even have a few Jonah moments.

My prayer for you is that you have the courage, strength, determination and the wisdom to you love your neighbor and your enemy as Christ has loved you, and that you seek out those who will bring justice, mercy, and lasting peace to accompany you on your journey.

Your salvation is not dependent on whom you vote for, or in whether you vote at all; for you are under no biblical or theological obligation to support a person or party or proposal or initiative if that vote violates your conscience.

But if you choose to not participate in voting, may you find ways to make your stance mean more than just sitting this one out. Do something to protect the poor, oppressed, and defenseless who might have been helped or shielded by your vote.

And I pray that God grant you the grace to affirm the image of God in every person, including each and every one of our political candidates and leaders, and may you find the civility within your soul to impartially and energetically embrace any pursuit of genuine human flourishing they propose.

And may you find empathy for the political decisions of others that you find troubling — particularly those of family and friends. May you have the ears to hear what lies at the heart of their concerns, and the eyes to see the noble search for goodness that is motivating their choice, especially if you strongly disagree with their candidate, party, or the politics they support.

Those who are led by the Spirit of God must learn to set aside our acrimony and help heal a severely divided nation. May we all join in that work, and giving our support to those who will beat their swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.