Being Lovable

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St. John's, Linden Hills
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We've got two love stories this week, and I'm going to remind you of a third one, from last Sunday. Christians are fond of saying that the Old Testament God is judgmental and the New Testament God is forgiving. That's just not accurate. The funniest forgiveness story in the Bible is Jonah, from the Old Testament, and we heard the ending today. The Bible is seldom comic, at least on the face of it, but Jonah is a slapstick farce.

So, God tells Jonah to be a prophet of doom. He flees by ship. A storm comes. The sailors do rock, paper, scissors or something to find out whose god is mad at who. It points to the Jewish guy. Turns out, Jonah has a death wish and has them throw him into the sea, which he says will satisfy the Jewish god. They don't think so, because they are too far from his jurisdiction, but he explains that The Lord is actually a Universal God, which is kind of a new concept. Very reluctantly, they toss him in, and the Jewish god stops the storm. As far as they are concerned, them's the breaks, and too bad for Jonah, but you should never mess with the gods. Especially one who can mess with you *anywhere.*

Meanwhile, underwater. Instead of letting him drown, God sends a big fish. Jonah spends a whole chapter singing God's praises inside the fish. He promises a lot of religious ceremonies if he ever escapes. As the old saying goes, there are no atheists in foxholes, or fish bellies. After three days, God has the fish spit him up on the beach.

But before he can scrub off the stench, buy incense, and sacrifice some unblemished lambs, God sets him back to work. Sin City: Nineveh. When he gets there, he mumbles something to nobody in particular: um, okay, *you've got 40 days until something bad comes, so, um…*

And, unlike the typical Bible story, the people *listen!* They all fast and pray to Jonah's God. They start to turn their lives around. Start telling the truth. Stop evicting poor widows and orphans. Pay everyone a decent wage. Quit cheating customers and robbing corner stores. They confess their embezzling and repay the money. Incredible. And it wasn't even a local god telling them what to do.

But instead of thanking God for saving him from the whale, and for giving him the chance to steer a whole city away from evil, instead of thanking God for not smiting Nineveh, and for sending him a shade plant on a sweltering day, he has a tantrum. His precious shade plant withers in the hot sun. He bitterly gives God a fake reason for his having run away to the ship: *I knew you were a God of love! I predicted it: you would be too weak to go through with it! I was right!*

What a lazy, selfish clown. What a phony. What an upside-down story. Instead of being rejected, the prophet's message is embraced. Instead of applauding God's love of people, animals, and even plants, Jonah pouts. He even forgets that God saved him with a fish, and three times ignored his wish to die rather than do his duty, endure the hot sun, or watch those nasty Ninevites be forgiven. But he *did* do his job.

Story Number Two. A farmer pays the full-day workers a full-day's pay, but then pays the guys who only worked the last hour the same thing. They sat around for seven hours in the marketplace? Playing dominos and drinking coffee? *That isn't fair,* say the tired full-day pickers. The farmer should pay by the hour! Or the bushel! He picked us first!

But the farmer points out that it's his money and he chooses to spend it like this.

- *Yeah, well, you're gonna go bankrupt like that, sir.*
- *Yeah, well, maybe we will wait around next time and get the morning off, sir.*

God is like that, says Jesus. Showering blessings on the hardworking *and* the hardly working. What's up with that? It's crazier than communism, and even less logical. Communism at least has a rule, "from each according to their ability to each according to their need." Jesus' farmer is even more of a granola-crunching hippie than that. *Ability? Need?. I don't measure you that way. You are not inputs or skill sets. You aren't makers or takers. All your markets, your supply and demand mean nothing to me.*

Would you run a business that way? I guess we could be like that farmer who was asked what he'd do if he won a million in the lottery. He replied, "I'd just farm until it was all gone!" In *real life*, some prices are too high: we don't buy. Or a wage is too low: we don't take the job. But the farmer who pays the same amount to everyone who showed up, for 1 hour or ten? He's a fool! Is Jesus calling God a fool?

No. In fact, Jesus says God is not always forgiving. Maybe you remember the third story, from last week, which might not be a love story. It doesn't have a happy ending. Last week, Jesus casts a king instead of a farmer in the role of God. A slave got the king to cancel his million-dollar debt. Then he cruelly seized his fellow slave over a very small debt. Jesus says: God is not always like the farmer. The king gives the creep what he deserves, because the unmerciful slave learned nothing. His apology to the king had been fake. He was still a con man, like some figures we read about in the news. Shameless. Forgiven but unforgiving. He thinks the rules don't apply to him. The Golden Rule is for suckers, according to him. He uses the Rule of the Jungle: do unto others if you think you can get away with it.

So God says, ok: *thy will be done. I will do unto you what you apparently think should be done unto others. I will respect your nasty logic, even though you are wrong. That's what used to be called tough love.*

I think I'm mostly lovable. Sometimes I make it hard for others to love me, but I'm pretty much a pleaser. Kind of a show off. I know I should try to love everybody, even people I don't like. But I don't. I have a former friend who never paid back some money I loaned him, and instead of forgiving and forgetting, I hold a grudge. We're supposed to be as loving as we can, and know that God is even more loving than that.

Does God really forgive everything? The Jonah story says yes, if you have a change of heart, and change your ways. The farmer story says yes, as long as you make an honest effort to do the work you are given. But the king story says no, God can't forgive when you act like you did nothing wrong. It's almost like shamelessness makes you unlovable.

Tonight, our Jewish cousins begin a day of fasting – Yom Kippur – as they end a week of making amends. In the synagogue tomorrow, they will hear the whole story of Jonah, who did everything wrong, but succeeded as a prophet of doom with God's help. By the time Colleen and I open up the sermon discussion group tomorrow evening on zoom, fasting will end with big family dinners and a collective sigh of relief. Admitting we have done wrong is exhausting. But it makes us more lovable.