

Non-Justice (part 2)

by Bill Moller

(a sermon transcript—Jonah 3:10 – 4:11)

Two verses before the book of Jonah concludes, we read the following:

"I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

What was Jonah so angry about that he would rather die than live?

The end of the previous chapter tells us:

"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."

Jonah was angry about Non-Justice! Mercy was not what he felt the citizens of Nineveh deserved. Jonah wanted justice! Jonah wanted God to punish the sins of the people of Nineveh. He wanted them to get what they deserved.

Last week I introduced the idea of non-justice. We compared justice (people getting what they deserved) with non-justice (people NOT getting what they deserved). I pointed out that there were two kinds on non-justice: one is evil (in-justice), and the other is good (mercy). In both types of non-justice people don't get what they deserve. In one they get away with murder. In the other their debts are forgiven.

Last week's story from Scripture was about a servant whose debt was forgiven (Matt. 18:21-35). He received non-justice (mercy), but he

went out and demanded justice from someone who owed him money (he tried to have the man imprisoned for not paying his debt). Apparently he did not grasp the gift he was given.

What we found in last week's text was that everyone cried out for mercy (non-justice), and the servant who had been shown mercy ended up paying a price for his failure to show mercy to others. And the passage concludes by saying:

"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The man was imprisoned because he failed to show mercy.

Peter, who started the story with his question:

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?"

...received a very clear answer. Always forgive, or risk punishment for failing to show mercy.

Jonah was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel. Probably in the mid-8th century BC. He was, most likely, a contemporary of Isaiah – who was preaching his message in the southern kingdom of Judah. In 2 Kings 14 we read about a prophet named Jonah son of Amittai. He is credited with delivering the word of the Lord – saying that God had heard that everyone in Israel was suffering and that

(Continued on page 2)



(Continued from page 1)

they would be saved.

During the time of Jonah and afterward, the Assyrian kingdom, based in what is now northern Iraq, was conquering the surrounding nations. According to historians and scholars the Assyrians were extremely brutal – impaling their victims on poles, skinning people alive, wearing necklaces made with pieces of human skulls.

Nineveh was one of the great cities of the Assyrian kingdom. We read the words “great city” several times in the book of Jonah. At one point Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire.

It is at this time and with this knowledge that Jonah hears the word of the Lord:

“Go into the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come before me.”



Imagine the voice of God: Bill, I want you to go to one of the cities where the Islamic State has control and I want you to say to them, ‘Hear the word of the Lord, Forty more days and you and your city will be overturned.’

I fear my reaction might have looked the dusk cloud left by the Road Runner as he zipped out of town? I, too, might have headed for Tarshish.

But God has a way of bringing us back in line with his Will. Jonah tried to escape. He headed to Joppa, bought tickets for the next ship heading as far away from Nineveh as possible – Tarshish. We don’t know exactly where Tarshish was. Some speculate it was near Spain. Regardless of its location, Jonah would

never make it to his imagined paradise away from God. In fact Jonah’s disobedience put others at risk – as the sea grew fierce and the sailors scrambled for a solution, Jonah eventually steps up and admits why everyone was in peril.

Keep this in mind - even at that point; Jonah still wasn’t ready to go to Nineveh. Rather than telling the sailors to turn around and head back to Joppa, he decides he’d rather die, and tells them to throw him into the sea. Jonah was willing to die rather than see the people of Nineveh repent and allow God to show mercy on them and forgive them.

Deep inside our fallen nature is a little voice that cries out for justice in hope of getting revenge. Jonah sees the Assyrians as brutal barbarians and he cannot imagine extending mercy to them. In his world sinners should get what they deserve

– justice. Jonah cannot conceive of forgiving killers.

In the fall of 2006 a lone gunman entered a one room school house in Pennsylvania. He gathered up the little Amish girls and shot ten of them – killing five, before finally taking his own life.

An article in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* opens with these words:

The blood was hardly dry on the bare, board floor of the West Nickel Mines School when Amish parents sent words of forgiveness to the family of the killer who had executed their children.

Later in the article the author writes about the Amish, saying:

Their model is the suffering Jesus who carried his cross without complaint. And who, hanging on the cross, extended forgiveness to his tormentors: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Beyond his example, the Amish try to practice Jesus' admonitions to turn the other cheek, to love one's enemies, to forgive 70 times seven times, and to leave vengeance to the Lord. Retaliation and revenge are not part of their vocabulary.

The West Nickel Mines School was the Amish people's Nineveh. But they understood what Jonah could not accept. It is the task of the Christian to offer mercy to other - just as God extended mercy to us 2000 years ago, and still does every day of our lives.

Back in the northern kingdom of Israel, God had promised, through Jonah, that Israel would be saved. But we don't know what God had in mind. What did God mean by "saved"? Jonah is so blinded by his hatred of the Assyrians that he cannot conceive of the idea that "saving" them might also be part of God's plan. His obsession with revenge prevents him from seeing all that God is doing for him. He is angry!

On the open seas God delivered Jonah rather than letting him drown. In Nineveh God preserved Jonah first from the brutal Assyrians - they didn't kill him when he started preaching - and then God delivered him from the scorching heat.

Even after all he had witnessed, Jonah still struggled with God's question, "Do you have

the right to be angry?" What was Jonah angry about? Angry at God for showing mercy? Angry at what Jonah saw as an in-justice? Angry that the Jews were not the exclusive recipients of God's blessings? Angry that the people of Nineveh would experience the mercy God extends to all people?

When Jonah was in the belly of the "fish" his spiritual vision seemed to clear and he offered a wonderful prayer. We read portions of that prayer in our Call to Worship. Allow me to read all of the prayer:



"In my distress I called to the Lord,

and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,

and you listened to my cry.

You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me;

all your waves and breakers swept over me.

I said, 'I have been banished from your sight;

yet I will look again

toward your holy temple.'

The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me;

seaweed was wrapped around my head.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.

But you, Lord my God,

brought my life up from the pit.

"When my life was ebbing away,

I remembered you, Lord,

and my prayer rose to you,

(Continued from page 3)

to your holy temple.

“Those who cling to worthless idols
turn away from God’s love for them.

But I, with shouts of grateful
praise,

will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make
good.

I will say, ‘Salvation comes
from the Lord.’”

Jonah prayed that he would
sacrifice to the Lord. Yet,
despite his words, he could not
bring himself to put aside his
personal idol - demanding
justice and seeking revenge for the brutal acts
of the Assyrians was more important to Jonah
than the love of God. He refused to share his
compassionate God with the people of Nineveh.
Non-justice was the last thing Jonah wanted to
see happen. Yet, I think he knew better – that’s
why he sulked in a place east of the city. He
knew what God had done through him and he
could not reconcile how God could show mercy



to sinners – to non-Jews.

Here is a man who despite his reluctance was
carrying a mighty message to all he
encountered. Even the sailors on the ship got it.
Certainly the people of Nineveh
got it. Why didn’t Jonah get it?

The book of Jonah ends without
drawing any conclusions about
Jonah. There are no answers to
the questions God poses. Our
last image is of a sweaty, sulking
prophet sitting in a field outside
of town while nearby there
were 120,000 Ninevites
celebrating their salvation.

We don’t know if Jonah ever
embraced mercy. Or do we?

Someone wrote a book about him. Maybe
Jonah wanted to share the hard fought lesson
he learned. Maybe the best way he knew to
help us understand mercy was to show his
flaws – to sacrifice himself so that others might
come to a better understanding of God’s ways.

Let us pray...