

“The Most Successful Prophet in the Bible” June 25, 2023

Jonah 4:1-10

Westminster, Greenville

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Ben Dorr

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I’ve got THREE questions for you this morning.

The first question is, I hope, an easy question:

**Have any of you here today ever grumbled about something before?**

That’s not just an easy question.  
It’s a rhetorical question, right?

Just a couple weeks ago, I had a very busy day ahead of me, and I had to get up a bit earlier than I usually do not only for the day at hand, but also in order to take our dog to doggie daycare.

Now here’s the thing about our dog.

She can tell—I don’t know what it is, but she can tell when we get up in the morning, if it’s a doggie daycare morning...she can tell by something we do, or some habit I have, if that’s where she is headed that morning.

She gets all excited. Too excited.  
She starts barking, and jumping...

Now she’s in the backseat of my car, but doesn’t want to stay in the backseat, and in my rush to get out the door, I forgot the strap that would belt her in to the backseat of the car, so she’s constantly sticking her nose up front, and licking me, and trying to get into the front seat and I’m elbowing her back like this...

We were parked in a line of cars on Laurens Rd, and she made a lunge—and I lunged back—and my foot came off the brake...and what do you think happened?

I bumped into the car in front of me.

Great.

Now I'm not going to be able to get a head start on the day.

I'm going to be late for my very busy day.

Because I pulled over, and the other car pulled over...and there were no damages, no claims, it all ended up being fine....

But I still arrived at doggie daycare later than I wanted,  
and I arrived at the office later than I had planned...  
and what do you think I was doing, the rest of the day?

Grumbling.

With words I will not repeat from this pulpit, I was grumbling.

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So, my first question this morning is whether you've ever grumbled about something before.

I hope that was an easy question.

The reason I ask that question is because of Jonah.

We have arrived at the end of Jonah's story today.

Do you recall what happened last week in Jonah's story?

(That's not the second question, by the way...that's just a transitional question...I'll tell you when we get to the second question I want you to remember.)

Last, week Jonah walked into enemy territory.  
 He preached a one-sentence sermon.  
 And instead of rejecting him, ignoring him or arresting him,  
                   EVERYONE in Nineveh repented because of him!

By any measure, Jonah is the most successful prophet in the history of the Hebrew Bible!

Think about it.

All the prophetic giants that we hear about in church—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—none of them had the kind of success that Jonah had!

They were ridiculed, ignored, persecuted, put in prison—  
                   all because they did what God asked them to do.

But not Jonah.

When Jonah goes to Nineveh, even the animals are wearing sackcloth in the end!

It's a response unlike what any other Old Testament prophet ever received in the history of scripture.

All of which brings us to our text for today.  
 How does Jonah respond to his astounding success?  
 Does he celebrate? Does he do a victory dance?  
 You know what he does.  
 He grumbles!

In fact, Jonah is so upset he says to God:  
 "...please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

I mean...whew!

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So why is Jonah grumbling?

I think the answer to THAT question...has something to do with the SECOND question that I want you to remember today.

The second question is this:

**Who deserves what?**

You see, Jonah's got an idea of who deserves what.

Jonah doesn't believe that the Ninevites deserve God's mercy. Jonah believes that he deserves BETTER than being called by God to help save Nineveh!

Jonah's grumbling...revolves around the question:

**Who deserves what?**

Have you ever asked yourself that question before?

Of course you have.

It's a question we all ask from age 2 to age 92.

I recall a Sunday morning years ago, in one of my former congregations—everyone was coming through the line after worship, and this older gentleman approaches.

He was something of a curmudgeon in the church, but he had a mischievous sense of humor.

I asked how he was doing.

He replied, "Better than I deserve."

I said, “I’m glad to hear it.”

A smile crept across his face, and he said, “Careful how you answer that one, preacher!”

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### **Who deserves what?**

Of course, sometimes this question—who deserves what—sometimes it cuts much deeper than a fumbled response in church on Sunday morning.

James Barber is scheduled to be executed in the state of Alabama next month.

He killed Sarah Gregory’s grandmother back in 2001.  
There’s no question of his guilt.  
He admits to the crime.

Sarah Gregory was filled with rage at Jimmy Barber for the past two decades.

Then in the fall of 2020, she decided to write to Mr. Barber.

“The internal struggle that has eaten me alive all these years has to end...” she wrote. “I am tired of carrying this pain, this hate in my heart. I can’t do it anymore. I have to...forgive you.”

She sent the letter, not knowing what response she would get.

When Barber received the letter, he says:

“I broke down and started crying...I thought [the family] would gloat and say, ‘You’re gonna get what’s coming to ya.’”

But Sarah Gregory’s forgiveness, he said, “brought [him] to [his] knees.”

James Barber, you see, had already converted to Christianity while in prison, and was baptized while in prison. And the two, Barber and Gregory, kept up their correspondence, even talking on the phone, forging an unlikely bond these past 3 years.

About Barber’s execution, Gregory says:

“I don’t want it to happen...I spent so long believing in ‘an eye for an eye’—I’ve changed.” But she admits some of her family, relatives of her grandmother, don’t feel the same way, which she also understands.<sup>1</sup>

### **Who deserves what?**

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Of course, that question wasn’t just on Jonah’s mind.  
It was also on Jesus’ mind, when he was preaching and teaching all those years ago.

And one day he told a parable.  
Do you remember our first text for today?  
The parable of the laborers in the vineyard?

At the end of the parable, the early morning workers noticed that the late-in-the-day workers were receiving pay as if they had worked the entire day!

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bruenig, “What It Means to Forgive the Unforgivable,” *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2023.

So they got excited.  
They did the math.  
They started guessing how much more they might receive.

But when they get paid the same as everybody else, and the truth was that they worked longer and harder than everyone else, you remember what they did, right?

They grumbled.

All of which seems to suggest that when Jesus answers the question of who deserves what...it might not be the same as the answer you or I might give...

“The last will be first, and the first will be last.”

You know, come to think of it, I’m not sure I LIKE this parable very much...

Let’s go back to Jonah.

If there’s anyone who received MORE than they deserved in the book of Jonah...it’s not just the Ninevites.

It’s Jonah!

The IRONY of Jonah’s grumbling is that while he gets angry about the grace the Ninevites received from God, he’s oblivious to the grace that he has received from God.

After all,  
by the end of the book of Jonah,  
Jonah has disobeyed God, been saved by God,  
been given a second chance by God....

And with that second chance, he becomes the most successful prophet that God has ever had!

Jonah would not be where he is without God's grace.

But for whatever reason, Jonah cannot see it.

Will he ever see it?

Will he ever see the grace that God keeps giving him?

We don't get an answer to that question.

The book ends without telling us what happens to Jonah.

All of which makes me think this book that we've been studying for four weeks isn't really about Jonah.

It's about US.

And it's about God.

It's about OUR relationship with God.

It's a story about the way God sees other people.

It's an invitation for us to consider, or reconsider, the ways that WE see other people.

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The Presbyterian pastor Scott Black Johnston once put it like this:

The most basic ethical question we can ask is [this]:

**When I look at another person, what do I see?**<sup>2</sup>

That's the THIRD question I want you to remember:

**When I look at another person, what do I see?**

It's a question that provokes a whole host of questions.

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Black Johnston, *Elusive Grace: Loving Your Enemies While Striving for God's Justice*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2022.



When you look at a person wearing a MAGA hat, what do you see?

When you look at a person who is wearing a Black Lives Matter t-shirt, what do you see?

When you look at a person who lives on the streets of Greenville...

When you look at a person who was incarcerated but is now free...

When you look at a parent who is yelling at their child in the supermarket in a way that makes you cringe...

When you look at a CEO who drives a very expensive car and lives in a lavish home and donates a lot of money to the charities that do good work in the city in which you and I live....what do you see?

When you look at the person in your family who wounded you long ago, what do you see?

When you look in the mirror,  
and consider all the gifts that God has given you,  
what do you see?

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Esau McCaulley recently wrote a piece in *The New York Times* about his father.

McCaulley grew up, he said, with a dad who “seemed to care more about drugs than his children.”

His mother basically raised him.

He had good male role models, from his football coach to men in his church.

They shaped him. They molded him.  
 But when it came to his father, his father failed him.  
 The wound was RAW and it ran DEEP.

“We never developed that traditional father-son relationship,” he writes, “but I did forgive him before he died in 2017.”

How did McCaulley do it?  
 How did he forgive his dad?

He said that over time, he came to see his father in a different light.

“I forgave my father not because I concluded that his actions were not as bad as I recalled. They were. I began the long process of forgiving him when I recognized him as more than a character in my story.

“His addiction was not a personal attack on us,  
     but a poorly chosen coping mechanism  
     that had ramifications that he did not foresee.

“I found space for compassion because I believe all human life is...a gift from our creator.

“Forgiving my father meant trading in a desire for revenge for past wrongs and instead wishing for the good that can come from changed behavior.

“I wanted him to discover joy, love and peace.”<sup>3</sup>

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I wish Jonah could have met Esau McCaulley or Sarah Gregory.

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<sup>3</sup> Esau McCaulley, “My Father Failed Me. Here’s How I Learned to Forgive Him.” *The New York Times*, June 17, 2023.

If he had met them, talked with them,  
Jonah just might have been able to learn  
how to turn his grumbling into grace.

But let's not be too hard on Jonah.  
We don't know what happened with him.  
We don't know what Jonah does with all the grace that God has  
given him.

The book of Jonah ends without a conclusion.  
It does not tell us what Jonah did next.

It ends with a question from God to Jonah.  
So maybe Jonah has a change of heart.

I don't know.  
But I do know this.

Each of us, in some way, shape, or form, also needs a change of  
heart.

With some grudge we're holding, some forgiveness we're  
withholding, some way in which we're viewing somebody, and perhaps  
we need to take a different look.

All of which raises a fourth question—can you handle one more  
question this morning?

It is, in fact, the most important question.

You remember the first three:  
Have you ever grumbled about something?  
Who deserves what?  
When you look at another person, what do you see?

After you consider each of those questions, consider this one.

And don't answer it with words.

Answer this question with how you live your life:

**What will you do with all the grace that God has given to you?**

Amen.