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Commemoration of Jonah

SELC Eastern Circuit Pastors Winkel
and District Board of Directors

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I like to use the commemoration of saints - especially the lesser ones, like Jonah - when I can. So since Jonah's day of commemoration was Saturday, and no one was assigned for today, you get Jonah.

But not Jonah the fish story. Jonah the mercy story. For that's really what this book is all about. God teaching Jonah - and us - about His mercy. It is about the God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. The God who said: I desire mercy, not sacrifice.

Jonah didn't like that God. Jonah, I think we could say, didn't want that God. He wanted his pound of flesh from the Ninevites, and thought God should, too.

But Jonah learned, as we need to learn and keep learning, that we don't get to decide who deserves God's mercy, love, and forgiveness. That's not our business. We are simply told: *as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive* (Col 3:13), and: *Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful* (Luke 6:36).

Which is hard. On so many levels. On a synodical level, with those we disagree with. Those we think are moving our synod in a direction we don't think it should go (whichever direction you think that is). Those we think are playing politics a bit too much. On the district level, when there are disagreements on the Board, or in the Circuit. And in our congregations, when there are members giving us grief, those who grumble and meddle and seem more concerned about showing up for Voters meetings than for Divine Services. It's easy, like Jonah, to run away. It's easy, like Jonah, to say (or at least think): No mercy for you!

But that also doesn't mean agreeing with everybody and everything. That's not mercy either. Mercy, rather, does what is hard. It goes to Nineveh. It speaks the Word in truth and love. It calls to repentance and forgives those who repent. It is firm but respectful.

That's why Jonah is much more than a fish story. The fish just got Jonah to do what he didn't want to do, but it didn't change him. He was just as unwilling and unmerciful after being lunch as he was before. Maybe even moreso. He was angry and didn't want to live in such a world, *where God was merciful to people like them*.

But just as God didn't give up on the people of Nineveh, so He didn't give up on Jonah. Just as He sent the fish to have mercy on His *rogue* prophet, so then He sent a worm to have mercy on His *angry* prophet. The worm doesn't get as much press as the fish, but it

might be more important. For while the fish just got Jonah to do what he didn't want to do, the worm was to get Jonah to believe what he didn't want to believe, and to trust the mercy of God. The folks in Nineveh weren't the only ones who needed to repent.

So the question is: did it work? We're not told. The book just ends and we don't get to hear what Jonah does. Does he run away again? Spew more anger at God? Repent?

Well Jesus did this, too. In the Parable of the Lost, or Prodigal, Son, we are also left hanging: did the older son come into the party or not? There, Jesus is speaking to the older sons, the Pharisees and scribes, and challenging them. Will they rejoice in the mercy of God toward the lost? Will they rejoice in His forgiveness? Or will they remain in their anger? Perhaps this ending to Jonah is challenging us in the same way. Will we repent of our unmerciful ways? Will we rejoice in the mercy and forgiveness of God for those we think not deserving of it?

Lord, have mercy upon us.

And He did, and He does. For, of course, the other important part of the story of Jonah is the sign of Jonah. That as Jesus said, *just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth* (Matthew 12:40). That just as Jonah was spit out to life again, so would Jesus rise to life again.

That's where we usually stop with this sign, but perhaps there's a little more to it than that. For if Jesus is our Jonah, then this too: *He became the unmerciful one*. He became the rogue for us rogues, the rebellious one for us rebellious ones. He became sin for us, is how Paul put it. Maybe Paul got that from this story. Jesus became us Jonahs, so that we might become sons of God. He was crucified that we be forgiven. Made new. Raised to life. Mercy upon mercy. Grace upon grace.

So just as God didn't give up on the people of Nineveh and didn't give up on Jonah, so He doesn't give up on you. For still He is a God *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*. Even for rogue and undeserving pastors and people, like you and me.