

Devotion 35:

Our Father Loves Our Enemies

Jonah 1—4

Martin Luther once wrote, “The Law is our constant companion, but the Gospel is always a stranger in our midst.” I believe this quote cuts two ways in our lives: toward ourselves and toward others. And we are brutally unmerciful toward both.

Our Father invites Jonah to take part in proclaiming His salvation message. Unfortunately for Jonah, his intended audience is his hated enemy, the Assyrians in the city of Nineveh. Jonah is not even sent to his own people.

As you know, Jonah tries to flee from God but God sends a great fish to swallow him. Incidentally, God worked for good through Jonah’s disobedience. As a result of his fleeing, a ship full of sailors were saved. (1:16) Jonah reluctantly but dutifully proceeds to proclaim our Father’s message to the Ninevites.

Amazingly, all of the pagans in the city “*believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.*” (3:5) And this was our Father’s response:

“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” (3:10)

Now you might think that Jonah, who was used by God for His kingdom-advancing purposes and who saw such great results, would be overjoyed. Hardly.

“But Jonah became greatly displeased and became angry.” 4:1

Now we get to the heart of the story. We discover in chapter 4 that since the first word he received from God, Jonah held bitterness and resentment in his heart toward the Ninevites:

“O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” 4:2

Jonah and his countrymen traditionally rejoiced in God’s special mercies to Israel but wished only His wrath on their enemies. Israel became jealously complacent about her favored status with our Father, and was reluctant to share the Lord’s compassion with her neighbors, especially her enemies. Jonah and Israel had forgotten that they were blessed to be a blessing to the world.

Our Father's compassion shows beautifully in the parable that ends the story. Jonah is moping over a vine that grew, shaded him, and then died the next day. But the Lord said:

"You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" 4:10-11

The book of Jonah fittingly comes at the end of three minor prophets in a row that show our Father's justice, vengeance, and compassion toward all people. Ironically, Jonah has the most success as a prophet but he can't enjoy it due to his hardness of heart. Had God sent him to Israel or to Judah, we know that he would have encountered deaf ears as the other prophets did.

Do you have any people in your life today to whom you don't want to proclaim God's salvation message? Has a root of bitterness grown up in you, choking off God's grace, and tempting you to flee from your calling to be like our Father?

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you...Do to others as you would have them do to you... But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."
Luke 6:27-28, 31, 35-36

By His grace, our Father is calling us to share and to proclaim His concern for the whole creation. What we have been given is not for us to hoard and keep to ourselves. And as we have seen previously, it is not up to us to exact vengeance on enemies by either meting out punishment or by refusing to do good. Our Father wants us to join Him in loving our enemies. And the greatest way to love anyone is to proclaim to them in word and deed the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.