

“Second Chances”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture: Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

A few simple words can help you see the world in a whole new way.

“I love you.”

“I believe you.”

“You can do it.”

“I am sorry.”

“Yes.”

Add to that list this phrase: “a second time.” It’s part of the larger passage contained in the story of Jonah we just heard. “A second time” tells me that there was a first time, but second times tend to look and feel different than first times.

Jonah is a genre in the tradition of folk tales, stories common and beloved by Jewish audiences. They would have understood the pattern, the nuance, and their laughter would have built with each twist of this remarkable story.

The first time God came to Jonah in a dream, Jonah was told to go to the city of Nineveh and deliver a message against the wickedness of the people. Instead of being the messenger, Jonah turned and fled to the sea. He boarded a boat and not far into the journey, a huge storm came up. The mariners, so experienced and coated in generations of sea salt air, had never seen a storm quite like this one. They thought they were about to die.

Meanwhile, Jonah had been napping in the hold. He was shaken rudely awake, and told to appeal to God for safety: “Get up. Call on your God to spare us so that we do not perish.” The sailors drew lots that determined it was Jonah who had invoked the divine anger. He told the sailors to throw him overboard and save themselves. As soon as he was cast into the roiling sea, a giant fish, so big it could swallow a man whole, came and scooped Jonah up. For three days and three nights, he lived in the belly of the whale. Imagine how nasty that would have been.

In that time apart, Jonah prayed, giving honour for God’s care. Obviously, he had an attitude adjustment for we are told that he was belched right up on the shore.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. And this time, he acted differently. He carried the message to Nineveh, a huge and vile place, a city sixty miles wide, and he delivered the message that had been entrusted to him: “In forty days time, you will be overthrown.” This is undoubtedly the least compassionate sermon ever offered in the long history of sermons, but it worked. The people were sorry and changed their ways. And God too, changed God’s mind and did not destroy the city as first planned.

In religious language, second chances are known by words like mercy, compassion and reconciliation. Our United Church Creed reminds us that through the life and the ministry, through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we are enabled to claim the renewed chance of God's love and care. "God...who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and in others by the Spirit."

Reconciliation is about turning around and doing things differently with a new spirit.

Compassion is allowing ourselves to be open to unexpected possibilities.

Mercy is about living with heart for the other.

This week, I had a conversation with one of you about this notion of reconciliation and I was given the best definition I have ever heard. It is God slowing things down enough so that we can hear.

And this is what it looks and sounds like. I told this particular story a couple of years ago, when Bill and I were invited to speak to the community at the Islamic Centre. We had been asked to attend by Fr. Jim Hutton and the Iman, Mr. Dabliz. It was part of a larger conversation going on at that time about various religious perspectives on mercy. A few of you were present that day, so pieces of this story will sound familiar. All good... This is the story about the wedding I remember most in all my years of doing weddings.

I had received a call from a man whose parents I had known quite well. I knew the son, but I hadn't seen him for many years. He phoned and asked me to preside at his wedding. I met with the man and his beloved. She was lovely, and only later I realized she had done all the talking. We made the arrangements and I set out some ideas for the service. The wedding was to take place at a cottage in on Windy Lake. He was going to ask his brother to stand as his best man. She was going to ask her sister to be the best woman.

Three days later, he called me. "I don't know if you realized it or not, but I couldn't look you in the eye when we met. I don't think you know but I'm an alcoholic. When we got home from meeting with you, I called my brother and told him about the wedding, and he said he wouldn't come because I am a drunk, and I need to get help before I get married. Sue (I'll call her that) called her sister, and she heard pretty much the same thing. Her sister told Sue not to marry me, because it will only end in disaster. We sat up all night talking, and the truth finally hit me, though I've known it all along, just never said it out loud, never admitted it to myself. I am a drunk and this is the way the world sees me.

"I went to my first AA meeting last night, and it was awful. Sue drove me and she sat in the parking lot and waited while the meeting went on. She's been going to Al Anon occasionally, so she knows what was happening in there. I came out crying, and screaming for a drink. I went home and had about six beers, one right after the other. Tonight, I'm going to another meeting. I am going to do this. We have decided not to get married, and I'll maybe call you when I'm sober."

About four months later, he called again, and said that they wanted to go ahead. He was far from well, still trying and falling down, still going to meetings, but the two of them had

decided that the best way was to get married, so that this man would know that someone was unconditionally in his corner.

He told me that he couldn't ask the family to attend the wedding. He was still a drunk, especially in their eyes. Instead, they had asked their 80 year old neighbour and her grandson to witness the wedding. It would be at camp. Five people would be there: the bride, the groom, the two witnesses and me.

On a beautiful late March day, I drove to Windy Lake. I was checking the numbers of the cottages as I drove closer to the town, and when I came to their driveway, I was taken aback because there were about ten cars parked on the side of the road. Someone had shoveled a path into the cottage. As I walked down the snow path and came closer, I could hear talk and laughter and music.

I knocked on the door. The man's brother John opened it wide.

"What are you doing here?" (I'm the sort who more often than not, states the totally obvious.) "I thought you said you wouldn't come."

John said something that has stayed with me ever since, "I'm family. This is what family does. We dress up. We show up. I could never miss my brother's wedding, no matter what I think of the situation. He's my brother, and I will always be there for him. He and I both needed a second chance to be better than either of us thought we could be."

I walked into that cottage, and the room was filled with family, both sides – hers and his – and we formed a circle in front of the window that looked across the frozen lake to the fire tower, complete with a couple of dogs sleeping at our feet. There wasn't a dry eye in the room when that couple made their promises to each other and to God, and the family made promises back to them.

Maybe the main joke and gospel in this strange tale of Jonah is the sense that not even the Lord knows how far divine mercy and compassion can go, especially when it means sticking with the people God has chosen. Our God is in all the second chances we are given, all the times that we say yes, in spite of what we have known and learned, and in spite of all the ways we have turned and tried to run the other way and escape to the sea. God speaks and invites and then God speaks and invites again. It is mercy and compassion which enable us to slow down enough so that we can really hear.

Sources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, pages 266-271.

A paper prepared for a talk about mercy with the community at the Sudbury Islamic Centre, October, 2016.