



For many years I thought of myself as being fairly literate when it comes to technology. I've realized in more recent years that if I ever was, I am no longer. Part of it may be my impatience at learning new things. I don't like to read user manuals and I don't like to spend time learning how to operate a new device. I learn the few basics so I can operate the device and that's about it. So I'm often surprised when I learn something new. I remember learning a while back about a feature of my phone that I did not know existed. If you push the home button twice it shows all the apps that are running in the background. I checked it yesterday and there were 56 different apps running, all of which were using power and memory and affecting the operation of my phone in ways of which I was not aware.

I think there is a spiritual parallel to those apps running in the background. I believe there are, for lack of a better word, "apps" that run in the back of our minds, operating like a software program, telling us how to act and think. Those "apps" are a combination of our experiences, our influences, what we have been taught, and a collection of other factors. Those "apps" determine how we see people, how we see the world, and how we think about things in general. What this means is that you and I may not be the independent thinkers we believe ourselves to be. We have been conditioned to see ourselves, to see others, and even to see God in particular ways and here is what we need to understand about those "apps" – much of the time, we are not aware those "apps" are running in the background of our minds and we are not aware of how much power those "apps" exert over our thinking. Some of them are powerful for the good, and some of them, the not so good.

As we conclude our series of the book of Jonah this morning, I think it's fair to say that Jonah had some very faulty "apps" at work in his heart and mind. They were "apps" that caused him to look upon the Ninevites in a negative way. But it wasn't just the way in which he thought of the Ninevites; it was also the way in which he thought of God. Jonah wanted God to deal with the Ninevites in a way that suited Jonah, not God. Jonah, we will see, was not at all pleased with the way God chose to deal with the people of Nineveh. What Jonah needed to learn was The Compassion of God.

Follow along with me as I read the fourth and final chapter of Jonah, although we will start with the final verse of chapter three, because that is what causes Jonah's angry outburst in chapter four.

Jonah 3:10 – 4:11 –

*10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did*

*not bring the destruction he had threatened.*

*1 But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. 2 He prayed to the Lord, “Isn’t this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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.*

*3 Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”*

*4 But the Lord replied, “Is it right for you to be angry?”*

*5 Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city.*

*6 Then the Lord God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant.*

*7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant so that it withered.*

*8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.”*

*9 But God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.”*

*10 But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight.*

*11 And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”*

Chapter four begins by telling us that *Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry*. Why? What terrible calamity came about to make Jonah angry? What terrible condition of the world stirred his anger? What great injustice took place to bring about such anger? Jonah was angry for a really, really bad reason. Here’s what he says in verse 2, and you can almost see him stamping his feet and throwing a fit as he says it – *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*. Jonah, amazingly, is angry about God being a God of love and compassion.

Jonah did not flee to Tarshish because of fear or anxiety about the task God gave to him. Jonah did not flee because of any personal hardship he might experience. Jonah did not flee because he felt ill-equipped for his task. Jonah fled because he did not want to see God demonstrate love and compassion. Think about that for a moment. What Jonah wanted was not compassion, but a ring-side seat to a Sodom and Gomorrah style destruction of a people he detested. I have to admit that I’ve not always had the most positive attitude about some people, but I try to keep that to myself, because I recognize it’s wrong to feel that way. Jonah, however, didn’t even have the good sense to keep quiet about how he felt. He blurted out his feelings to God with no hesitation and he lacked the good sense to be embarrassed about his outburst.

Jonah’s complaint is especially tragic because he’s doing more than simply objecting to God’s actions. The folly of Jonah’s complaint is that he is actually objecting to the very nature of God. It is God’s nature to be compassionate and loving, and Jonah knew this, and because God was prone to compassion and love, Jonah wanted nothing to do with the mission he was given. Sadly, it wasn’t that Jonah did not understand the nature of God; he understood it very well – he just rejected it.

I have stated several times during this series that Jonah is not a very sympathetic character, and we become painfully aware of what a tragic figure Jonah is as we read chapter four. This chapter gives a very stark comparison between God and Jonah. God is loving and compassionate, *slow to anger and*

*abounding in love*, while Jonah gleefully anticipates the destruction of the large city of Nineveh. He was rooting for it. He was hoping for it. And he was greatly disappointed when it did not happen.

So, as we wrap up our brief study of the book of Jonah, here are a couple of thoughts to remember –

***We don't get to determine who is worthy of love and compassion; God does.***

If you're a parent, at some point you've dealt with an angry, petulant child. Perhaps it was in a check-out line or other public place, where the child decides to have a fit that comes complete with the stamping of feet, crossed arms, pouting lips, and an angry outburst. That's Jonah. Jonah decided he should be the judge and jury for the Ninevites, revealing that Jonah had some really, really faulty religion in him. Here is something important to remember – being religious does not guarantee a person will be compassionate. It should, but it does not. There is, sadly, many examples of the reality that religion does not automatically bring about compassion. We see far too many examples of the angry, judgmental face of religion. You've seen that side of religion. It's the pointing finger, the red face, the shouting at people of whom it disapproves, refusing to show an ounce of compassion.

To become a compassionate person sometimes requires a very pronounced change in our nature – a new nature – which is possible, as Paul reminds us as he writes II Corinthians 5:17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* And in Romans 12:2, where Paul writes *and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

***No one is outside of God's love.***

We live in a very contentious, divided time. We often hear the word *tribalism* to describe the manner in which we gather in groups of like-minded people. We separate ourselves and gather according to beliefs, politics, economics, and many other factors. Because we are often uncomfortable with differences, we associate with those who are similar to us. In doing so, however, we can become skeptical of those who are different from us, even to the point of becoming less than compassionate or loving in our dealings with those who are different.

Jonah did not approve of the manner in which God loves. He wanted judgment and punishment, not grace, compassion, and mercy. Jonah wanted to shrink the circle of God's love, allowing in only those of whom he approved. There are still too many people who want to shrink the circle of God's love, but however much they might want to shrink the circle, God wants to expand it, or do away with the circle all together. Paul says that in Christ *there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all on in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28). Those were the divisions of Paul's day, and they were very deep divisions between people. I think we can extrapolate that idea out and say that today there is no black, white, Hispanic, right, left, American, Russian, Iranian, South African, gay, straight; pick a category of people who make you uncomfortable and know that God loves them as much as he does you or me.

Even in the early church there was a struggle with understanding God's love for all people. As Gentiles were coming into the church in large numbers there was quite a bit of discussion about what would be required of them before they would be fully accepted into the church. Acts chapter 15 tells us about a gathering in Jerusalem, known as the Council at Jerusalem, to discuss the issue. Imagine, having a gathering to discuss who would be welcome into the church! Thankfully, it was decided to welcome people into the church regardless of their background!

Jonah did not believe the Ninevites were worthy of God's love. It was not, however, Jonah's decision to determine who was worthy of God's love. There are always people who want to serve as gatekeepers to God. It was true in the time of Jesus, as the religious leaders appointed themselves gatekeepers to God, seeing themselves as the ones who would decide who God loved and did not love, and it still happens today.

*If love is foundational to the nature of God, so it must be for us.*

Jonah has been gone for many centuries, but in some ways he is still with us. Jonah's closed mind still occupies the heads of many people who cannot open themselves to God's inclusion of all people as his children. His cold heart continues to beat in the chests of far too many who cannot – or will not – love other people, especially people who are different.

Love is foundational to the nature of God, so it must be for us as well. And if love is foundational, that means we must demonstrate the compassion of God. We often speak of being the *hands and feet of Christ*, and that is a good description of how we should live. Compassion is, we can say, the hands and feet of love. Compassion is the way in which we make love visible. Love that is not visible is not really love.

Compassion must be, then, at the heart of what we do as a congregation. We live in a time when there is a growing rise in radical individualism, a way of life that says, basically, *as long as I am happy and comfortable, all is well. As long as I have what I need, all is well. I've got mine, and that's what matters. I'm going to enjoy my life, do what I want to do, and that's that.* That type of life is what we find expressed in Jonah. As long as Jonah was comfortable and happy, things were fine. This is the lesson of Jonah and the plant. As he went out of Nineveh, Jonah sat down in a place overlooking the city, still hopeful that God might destroy it. When the plant grows up to provide shade for Jonah, he is happy. The coolness of the shade provides him with contentment. When things are going well for Jonah that is all that matters to him. But when the plant dies, and the heat of the sun beat down upon Jonah, he complains of his misfortune. God then scolds Jonah, pointing out his lack of compassion for Nineveh – *“Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” “It is,” he said. “And I’m so angry I wish I were dead.” But the Lord said, “You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?”* As long as things were good for Jonah, that is all that mattered to him.

We can never give in to that way of life. We can never give in to the pull of individualism that separates us from the needs of our community. There is far too much need for us to withdraw into the comfort of our own lives. We must continue to live compassionate lives and build that compassion into the heart of who we are as a church. I am very grateful for what we do as a congregation. We take care of our members, yes, but that is not all we do. We move beyond our own congregation, beyond our own walls and we minister to those who are in prison, we feed the hungry, we help to settle the refugees, and we perform countless other works of compassion. This is the heart of who we are, and thank God that it is!

The tone of our culture is not exactly one of love and compassion right now. We are at a critical juncture in history, one that requires the church to be the beacon of compassion that is so sorely needed. Let us be the hands and feet of Christ! Let us be the hands and feet of compassion!