

“God’s Beloved Hypocrite”

Jonah 2:1-10

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville

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I’ve got a word that I would like you to consider this morning.
The word is...disgusting.

What do you find disgusting?
Please don’t shout it out, don’t share with your neighbor.
Just consider the question as we proceed this morning.

About a year and a half ago, an article appeared in *The New York Times* entitled, “How Disgust Explains Everything”...

In the article, Molly Young writes:

“The more you read about the history of [disgust], the more convinced you might be that disgust is the energy powering a whole host of seemingly unrelated phenomena, from our never-ending culture wars to the existence of kosher laws...[it’s] a bodily experience that creeps into every corner of our social lives, a piece of evolutionary hardware designed to protect our stomachs that expanded into a system for protecting our souls.”¹

Of course, disgust has always been a part of us.
I’ve read that there are six basic emotions within us:
Anger, sadness, fear, joy, surprise...and disgust.

But the triggers for what disgusts one person at one day and time—
they can be very different than what disgusts someone else at another
day and time.

¹ Molly Young, “How Disgust Explains Everything,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2021.

In his 19th century work, “The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals,” Charles Darwin described an encounter that took place in Tierra del Fuego.

Darwin was at his campsite, and he was eating some meat.
It was cold meat, preserved meat.

As he was eating, one of the natives came over to Darwin, poked the meat with his finger, showing, Darwin wrote, “utter disgust at its softness.”

Darwin responded with his own feeling of disgust!
He was grossed out that this stranger had just stuck his finger in Darwin’s food!

Now, it was easy enough for Charles Darwin to understand why this stranger was disgusted by his food—the man had never seen meat look like that before—cold, soft, mushy.

But Darwin couldn’t quite figure out why he was repulsed by what the stranger did.

Was it because the man was from another culture,
a foreigner, and was nearly naked?

Neither the man nor his finger looked dirty...why was Darwin disgusted?²

Have you ever thought about what disgusts you?
Consider that question as we explore today’s text from Jonah.

² Ibid.

Our text from Jonah is the 2nd chapter.
Jonah has been swallowed by that big fish.
And what does Jonah do?

Inside the belly of the giant fish, Jonah offers a prayer.

It sounds, at first blush, like a very pious prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of praise for saving Jonah from the storm.

But take another look at what Jonah actually says.

Some biblical scholars argue that Jonah’s prayer from the belly of the fish is not as honest as it appears.³

That it’s a very HYPOCRITICAL prayer!

For example, in his prayer, Jonah says the following:
“As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.”

Jonah speaks as if he’d forgotten about God—but is that what happened in chapter 1?

Did Jonah forget about God?

No.

Jonah spent the first chapter trying to ESCAPE from God.

God is all that’s on his mind.

He just doesn’t want to do what God asked him to do.

He’s not forgetting the Lord, he’s fleeing the Lord!

Or take a look at verse 4 of our text:

“Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight;

³ For this exegesis, I am indebted to Jim Ackerman’s introduction to and commentary on the book of Jonah, found in The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, New York: HarperCollins, 1989.

how shall I look again upon your holy temple?””

Except Jonah wasn't driven away, he RAN away.
And "...how shall I look again upon your holy temple?"

Why is Jonah talking about the holy temple?
That's in Jerusalem.
Where does God want Jonah to go?
Not to Jerusalem.
God wants Jonah to go to Nineveh!

Do you see what's going on here?
Jonah's prayer appears to be a holy petition to God...but really, it's painting a much different picture than what actually happened.

After all, Jonah ran from God, disobeyed God, and after he's thrown into the sea, it's God who saves Jonah with the fish!

Where is Jonah's remorse? Where's the repentance?
Where in this prayer does Jonah say,
"God, I'm so sorry, I made a mistake,"??

This is why some scholars treat Jonah's prayer
not as a heart-felt prayer of contrition and humility,
but as a prayer of **false piety**...

So in response to this prayer, which ends with verse 9, do you remember what happens in verse 10?

"Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land."

That's a tame way to put it.
In response to Jonah's prayer, the fish...PUKED!
It found—or God found—Jonah's prayer to be...disgusting.

Have you thought about what you find disgusting?
Let's take a silent poll.
You don't have to raise your hand...

I wonder how many of you have ever used the 3-second rule.
You know about the 3 second rule, right?

If a piece of your food falls off your plate or off the counter at home, and is on the floor for less than 3 seconds, how many of you would pick it up and eat it, if you were eating dinner with your family?

How many of you would eat it if no one else was around?
How many of you would never eat it, once it touches the floor?

This is a silly example, I know.
When it comes to the three-second rule, I'm not sure that disagreement over what's disgusting matters very much.

But when it comes to church,
when it comes to extending hospitality in God's church,
disagreement over what's disgusting matters a great deal.

For example, our first text today is the call of Matthew.
What kind of life did Matthew lead?
He was a tax collector.

Someone that his neighbors would have looked at and said—
the way you make your living is abhorrent!

Taking money from your own people,
and giving it to the Roman people,

while you take some for yourself along the way...

That's repulsive. It's disgusting.

But none of that stopped Jesus.

Jesus waded right into those waters of disgust, and called Matthew to be his disciple.

And when he had dinner with Matthew and his fellow tax collectors, it was NOT the food that they were eating that the Pharisees found repulsive.

It was who Jesus was eating with!

When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Do you see the issue here?

It's the same issue that Jonah raised all those years before.

What does it mean to welcome everyone—
absolutely everyone, no exceptions—
as the child of God that they are?

Jonah didn't want God to extend God's grace to the Ninevites.
He found it disgusting.

The Pharisees didn't want Jesus to eat with tax collectors and sinners. They thought THAT was disgusting.

All of which makes me wonder...

Have you ever been in the position of welcoming someone, extending God's grace to someone—and somebody else criticized you for it?

Someone else found your hospitality...disgusting?

There's a famous episode of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood that first aired back in 1969.

In the episode, Francois Clemmons—
who was the first Black actor to appear as a regular
on a children's television show—
he played the policeman on the show.

Fred Rogers first met him when they were in church together, and Fred Rogers heard Francois Clemmons singing.

So he invited Mr. Clemmons to be on his show, and in this particular episode, after a long day at work, Officer Clemmons comes by the house of his friend, Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Rogers is soaking his bare feet in a small pool of water.
And he invites Officer Clemmons to do the same.

So he does, and after they soak their feet together in the pool, Mr. Rogers takes a towel and dries off the feet of Officer Clemmons.

It's a famous episode NOW because of how groundbreaking it was
BACK THEN.

After all, back then, a pool was not just a pool.
This was 1969.

The same year that the Supreme Court declared segregation in public pools to be unconstitutional.

And here's a popular television show for children in which a White person and Black person are, in essence—sharing the same pool.⁴

I wonder if Francois Clemmons or Fred Rogers ever received a letter after that showed aired, criticizing them for what they did.

I have no idea.

But it wouldn't surprise me if that happened.

Because here's the thing about the radical hospitality and grace of God's kingdom—it gets criticized.

Not everyone likes it, right?

Jonah didn't like it.

He makes that very clear in the last chapter of this book.

God extends God's grace to the Ninevites, and does Jonah celebrate at his success as a prophet of God?

No, no...Jonah gets angry at God!

How could you offer grace to THESE kind of people???

The hospitality and grace and welcome of God is never a neutral subject.

In the Bible, it's a controversial subject.

All of which makes me wonder...have you ever been part of a church that extended God's grace to someone, or to a group of people, and your church was criticized for welcoming those people?

⁴ From the StoryCorps podcast, found at [StoryCorps 462: In the Neighborhood – StoryCorps](#).

Years ago, the late pastor Ernest Campbell was serving a church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was 1963. JFK had just been assassinated. And a member of Campbell's church gave him a call.

This member suggested that one thing they might be able to do to partially redeem the tragedy would be to provide Marina Oswald—the widow of Lee Harvey Oswald—with an opportunity to improve her English.

She had expressed this wish and wanted to stay in the U.S.

The church made its plans, and in due time, while a battery of reporters waited hawkishly at the airport, Marina Oswald slipped into the community at night by train. She lived under cover with a family in the congregation until the church finally was forced to issue a press release.

Then the mail started coming in.

Some were quick and hot to say that the church's actions were unpatriotic.

Others said the move wasn't wise, others that it was unfair.

One woman wrote that she had belonged to the church for forty years, and everything it had done for her could fit on the back of a postage stamp.

Others simply said the church was grossly un-American.

The Reverend Campbell answered every single letter.

No one was ignored.

But what he said to each person who criticized their church was this:

“The one thing you haven’t shown us is that what we have done is unlike Christ.”⁵

What do you find...disgusting?

That’s not just an emotional question.

Or a food question.

Or an anthropological question.

It’s a faith question.

It has something to do with whom we welcome, and how we welcome them, when it comes to being God’s church.

You see, we’ve been talking about the vision and pillars of Westminster throughout the past year.

And the number one pillar of this church is hospitality.

It’s one of this congregation’s strengths.

In fact, I learned just a few weeks ago about a fascinating statistic within our denomination.

The vast majority of churches in our denomination are not growing.

But Westminster is growing.

In fact, if you look at PC(USA) congregations that have 400 members or more, between the years 2006-2021—a fifteen-year period—and you calculate the rate of growth for every church in that 15-

⁵ Ernest T. Campbell, “Follow Me,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, edited by Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994.

year period...do you know what Westminster's rate of growth was during that time?

27%!

Do you know where that ranks in our denomination?

Number 1.

During that 15 year period, no PC(USA) church grew at a higher rate.

It means that when it comes to hospitality, when it comes to welcoming people, y'all are doing something right!

Open Minds Open Hearts

So I got to wondering...

What would it look like not just to be number 1 in terms of growth, many people coming through our doors...what would it look like if we were criticized because of who was coming through our doors?

- You see, as far as I can tell, Jesus was always being criticized for the kind of people he welcomed, who he brought into his fold.
- And one of the messages of the book of Jonah is that everyone belongs in God's fold.

If the pastors of this church, and the Session of this church, started getting emails, criticizing us because of who we were welcoming, and how we were doing it...how would you feel?

Would it mean we were headed in the wrong direction?

Or would it mean we were following in the footsteps of Christ?

(Amen.)