

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
3 August 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Eight Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

***“This is Us: Getting Angry at the Unfairness of It All
This is Good News: God is Always Giving Grace to Us All”***

Seventh Sermon in the Summer Series:
This is Us: Seeing Ourselves in Scripture...Reflecting Good News in our Lives

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Jonah 3:10; 4:1-11

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

As he leaves Nineveh in chapter 3, Jonah should be jumping for joy that he made it out of that place alive and walking on Cloud Nine because his mission was a success!

If this was a final exam, Jonah got an A+. If it's a championship meet, he won gold. He's even worthy to receive the "Prestigious Prophet of the Year Award." After all, Jonah changed an entire city from being the enemy of his people to having them say *"I'm sorry; we were wrong; we'll stop what we're doing; we'll change our ways."* This saves countless future lives from the torture and abuse of the Ninevite Assyrians, not to mention it brings enlightenment and good news to a people who desperately need to know that they themselves are worthy of love and grace. As Father Richard Rohr says, "hurt people

hurt people." The Ninevites need some love and grace for their own sakes, as well as the world's.

So however, you look at this situation it is a "win!"

A win for Jonah.

A win for the Israelites.

A win for the Ninevites.

A win for God.

A win for the animals.

A win for the world and God's kin-dom.

So if this is a "win" all around, then why is Jonah so stinkin' mad?

The narrator says that this whole situation of God forgiving the Ninevites was "displeasing" to Jonah. Now we might read this and think this means Jonah is displeased as in "annoyed" like, *"I'm displeased that you chose to paint the room green instead of blue but oh well I'll deal with it."* But if we read the word

“displeased” with a mild manner, we’re missing the mark. In Hebrew the word being translated as “displeased” here is *râ‘a’ (raw-ah’)*; which means “*to be broken in pieces, to be shattered, injured.*”¹

Not only was Jonah utterly shattered and broken about this situation, meaning really hurt, perhaps to the point of feeling physical pain (as one does in the depths of grief or depression), the text also says, “*he became angry.*” The Hebrew word translated as angry here is *chârâh (khaw-raw’)* which literally means “*to burn, become hot, incensed, kindled, or furious.*”² This is a *visceral* kind of anger. Maybe even where we get the term hot-headed or red-in-the-face.

This type of anger is like a toddler throwing a tantrum. The toddler begins crying and the crying intensifies to screaming or wailing; sometimes they fall to the ground and are literally curled up or flailing or hitting things or throwing things; their faces often turn red, sometimes their whole bodies; and they are

inconsolable until the rage or sadness or disappointment or frustration passes. Tantrums are a full-body experience.

According to child psychologists, temper tantrums in toddlers are developmentally normal. These screaming, kicking, crying fits are part of typical emotional development and they allow our children to communicate their unhappiness and/or frustration about an event or response with their body since they cannot yet do with words. When they do not get what they want and they can’t say that with reason and rational to an adult, their expression all comes out sideways and every which way with their emotions and physical being.³

Jonah, we could say, is having a spiritual temper tantrum. And while we might be quick to criticize saying, “*He’s an adult, he should know better,*” the truth is, spiritually-speaking many of us are like toddlers when it comes to our spiritual maturity and development. We may hear God saying, “*I love you and I love everybody*” but

¹<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h7489/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

²<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h2734/kjv/wlc/0-1/>

³ Jennifer Margaret Katzenstein, “When to Worry about Toddler Temper Tantrums,” *Johns Hopkins Medicine*,

accessed on July 30, 2025 at <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/babies-and-toddlers-discipline/when-to-worry-about-toddler-temper-tantrums>.

we are not yet able to comprehend the depth and breadth of this kind of grace and love and so because we cannot understand God's grace as something rational, or defend it with our own reason, then we just kind of kick and shout and pout and complain when someone who we don't think deserves grace and forgiveness gets it.

In the heat of his anger and at the height of his shatteredness, Jonah goes off so to watch the city of Nineveh. He sits down and sulks and probably secretly hopes that Nineveh will erupt into flames.

He, like so many of us, wants revenge against the people who have so deeply harmed *his* people. Remember what I said last week? The Assyrians not only pillaged and plundered other countries for their wealth, they brutally mutilated their captives: amputating hands and feet, gouging out eyes, skinning and impaling them for entertainment. It's abhorrent.

From Jonah's perspective, it is utterly unfair that these type of people can just pray and fast and be forgiven without any kind of punishment in return.

Yet, in his vengeful-anger-tantrum- moment, Jonah does have the spiritual where-with-all to pray and Jonah prays / slash/ yells at God for being so...so....well...so "God-like"— so gracious and merciful, so slow to anger, so abounding in steadfast love, so relenting from punishment. How dare God, right?!

In 1968, poet Thomas John Carlisle published a book of poetry about Jonah's story entitled, *You! Jonah!* Though this collection is almost 60 years old, the poems are as relevant as ever. This one is called "Tantrum":

The generosity of God
displeased Jonah exceedingly
and he slashed with angry
prayer
at the graciousness of the
Almighty.
"I told You so," he screamed.
"I knew what You would do,
You dirty Forgiver.
You bless Your enemies
and show kindness to those
who spitefully use You.
I would rather die
than live in a world
with a God like You.
And [you know what?] don't try
to forgive me

either.⁴

This captures, with a bit of irony and humor, just how twisted our thoughts and emotions can get about God's love and grace.

Now, most of us, I think, would be quick to say that we are all about God's love and grace and we think it's a great thing—especially for people who are trying really hard to be good and do the right thing, people who are like us, perhaps. But in terms of Those People, the People Out There, the People Who Voted for That Person, the People who are Bombing that Country, the Companies who are Exploiting those Workers, the Department that is Deporting those Immigrants, the Protestors who are Advocating for That Issue... (*I could go on and on but you may fill in your own blank here...*)...

...in terms of people like “That,” people whose actions are really awful or are un-Christlike or just who are just plain mean and greedy and people who have done abhorrent things...well, I think if we're honest with ourselves, we'd say God's grace is not for them. I

mean maybe we'd tone that back a bit and say, well yes of course, God's grace is for them too, *But First* they have to “pay for what they've done.” They must be punished for their wrongdoing. They have to “serve their time” in order “for justice to be served.”

That is definitely how we humans think. That people need to be punished for all the bad things they do, and then once that punishment is over, maybe, just maybe we'll forgive them. Maybe. Although our country does a very poor job at this as we continue to penalize people who are formerly incarcerated and make it very, very hard for them to function in society. We make it hard for them to get a job, find a place to live, vote. We keep the punishment cycle going.

Psychologists, it turns out, have been researching this desire for revenge punishment and have found out some interesting things. In a recent Hidden Brain Podcast episode⁵, Shankar Vedantam spoke with Yale University Department of Psychiatry researcher, James Kimmel, Jr.—he studies how

⁴ Thomas John Carlisle, “Tantrum,” *You! Jonah!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 1968.

⁵ Hidden Brain Staff, “The Price of Revenge,” *Hidden Brain Podcast* (June 2, 2025), accessed on August 3,

2025 at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-price-of-revenge/>. The text from this footnote to the ending footnote about the podcast is taken from the transcript of that episode.

people respond when they are wronged.

Kimmel researches acts of violence that are reported in the news and all sorts of forms of revenge seeking. And through his research and experiments he's found that it's often compulsive. Addictive even, and cyclical.

So what happens in the brains of people seeking revenge?

Well neuroscientists discovered that when you have a grievance, this activates the reward and pleasure circuitry inside your brain. Just in the same way that seeing a place where you've taken drugs in the past will do if you're a drug user, or seeing a casino will do if you're a gambling addict.

Even more, in the research, they found that the nucleus accumbens area of the brain—which is the area of the brain associated with craving and compulsion—that area of the brain becomes extremely active while someone is considering retaliation against someone who has wronged them. And at the same time, there's a loss of connectivity or silence with the prefrontal cortex, which is the executive function control area

of the brain that's supposed to stop you from doing terrible things against your own interest, like seeking revenge.

As people experience this spike in feelings of aggression or revenge, it “lights up” the craving sensation part of the brain, and ameliorates the negative mood that they're experiencing. It helps to repair the sense of grievance that they're experiencing. It activates the pleasure and reward circuitry to surprising levels. We now know revenge seeking is incredibly pleasurable—and addictive! Revenge acts like a drug inside our brains. But also like a drug, the pleasure is short lived; it leaves us feeling worse but also now in harm's way because our act of pleasurable revenge seeking becomes the other person's act of grievance and provocation, or experience, igniting their revenge seeking desire. And so we, throughout human history, have experienced these revenge cycles over and over again.

Kimmel did experiments with scenarios of people being harmed at various levels and these study participants got to play every character in a courtroom that looks very much like our justice system—

perpetrator, victim, prosecutor, defender, judge, jury, warden—and from all sides these people get to fantasize about retaliation and revenge and some really awful things happen in study—people end up choosing to give the perpetrators in these scenarios punishments *way worse* than “an eye for an eye” justice. Like horrifically worse.

But then he did experiments in a courtroom that's very different than our traditional justice system. In this scenario, the judge in this courtroom is high above you and begins asking you a few questions.

The judge asks if the grievance that you've experienced, is that happening here today and can it be experienced with your senses? *Or* is it only in the past?

They found that people totally changed their demeanor when they were asked to reflect upon whether they were actively being harmed in this moment, or if it was in the past. Because the grievance exists most powerfully as a thought formation inside their brains.

Once they feel safe in their present moment, they are asked at that point, well, if that's so,

what might it be like to forgive the person who wronged you?

Now, almost no one wants to forgive in these experiments.

But the judge pushes back; they are told they do not have to forgive, *just to imagine it*. And what they found is that most people who *imagine forgiving* someone after going through this huge burden of prosecuting and punishing another person in the previous thought experiment, well, they realize they feel this immediate sense of relief from forgiving—AND their brains “light up” to prove this as well with the neuroscience.

Just the thought of forgiveness shuts down the pain center in your brain; it shuts down the revenge craving center in your brain; *and* it activates the executive function center in your brain.

Just the *talk* of forgiveness does this!

Kimmel concludes: Reflecting on forgiveness is possibly the most important self-healing mechanism we all have inside our heads, and yet we kind of don't know it's there much of the time.

So Kimmel took this information and then reflected back on his own religious upbringing and the teachings of spiritual and religious leaders. He cites the instruction of Jesus of Nazareth where we are not to forgive 7 times but 70 times 7 times. Kimmel explains that he doesn't believe that this is Jesus telling us how to get ourselves into heaven, or how to be a good person, or how to obtain the approval of church elders, or other people in society. The neuroscience really shows us now that Jesus was giving extremely practical and scientifically sound advice for preventing violence and restoring peace in your own life, in your family, in your community, your society, your nation, and in the world. We just have to follow it.⁶

Well friends, we are the followers of this Jesus of Nazareth, aren't we?

Culturally an "eye for an eye" has won out as the "best way" to "teach people a lesson," but it turns out we're just teaching and reinforcing cycles of vengeance and violence as we wire our neuro pathways in this manner.

⁶ Hidden Brain Staff, "The Price of Revenge," *Hidden Brain Podcast* (June 2, 2025), accessed on August 3,

Stories like Jonah break this cycle and reveal a different understanding of the way the world works.

Perhaps God is not so much concerned about punishing us, or anyone for that matter, for the wrong that we have done. Perhaps God is way more interested in us stopping the harm we are doing, repenting, and acting differently from this point forward. God is interested in our changed behavior, our changed hearts. God is not interested in "making us pay" for the bad stuff as much as God just wants us to stop doing bad stuff and love one another. Treat each other as the beloved humans that we are. A true change of heart and changed behavior is more than enough for God. Punishment is not part of the checklist for God's grace. Or part of the checklist for the process of transformation. Stopping the cycle of harm is.

The thing is, in our worldview and way of looking at things, we think that "punitive punishment" is the only way—or the best way—for people to learn that what they have done is wrong. But the book of Jonah

2025 at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-price-of-revenge/>.

shows us a different way. As we read last week, Jonah walks throughout Nineveh and preaches, “*Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.*” That’s it. That’s all he says. In other words, Jonah forecasts the future, tells Nineveh what will happen if they continue their behavior. And that is enough to make them stop.

I wonder why this doesn’t work for us?

It reminds me of climate scientists trying to explain to all of us that we need to stop producing pollution at the rate we are or else the earth will just continue to warm, creating more of the storms and weather patterns we’ve been seeing this summer. These scientists do not want to punish us for our past actions. They simply want us to stop and reverse course. Now. (Or yesterday!)

In a similar manner of not wanting to punish the wrongdoers, I have yet to hear a Ukrainian say that they want Russians to suffer for what has happened to them, they simply want Russia to stop attacking them, to return their land, let them live in peace so they can heal. The damage has been done. Retaliating and killing

Russian civilians will not make up for the Ukrainians who have died.

Tragically and horrifically, in Israel and Gaza we see the revenge cycle in full force. Years of Palestinian oppression by Israel has led to fighting back by groups like Hamas on October 7. But killing and starving Palestinian civilians will not make up for the horrific actions of Hamas on October 7 that killed Israeli citizens. It’s false logic and it’s horrifically inhumane. And it’s definitely not “an eye for an eye” in terms of the genocide that is happening. Someone has to stop the cycle.

So...back to that neuroscience research...

Kimmel and others have learned that “when we think about grievances, especially grievances that we have carried around for many years or many decades sometimes, we often tell ourselves the reason I’m holding on to this grievance is because I have this very sharp sense of fairness and justice and we’re carrying around this grievance because at some point in the future, we hope to level the scales of justice and basically make sure that the

good guys win and the bad guys lose. But the neuroscience shows us that part of the reason we're carrying around this sense of grievance is that at some level it is giving us *pleasure* to carry around this revenge fantasy. So if you think about this from an addiction model, I'm carrying around the grievance very much like the way I'm carrying around the picture of the bar if I'm an alcoholic or the casino if I'm addicted to gambling. It's not really about justice. It's about trying to satiate this drive for pleasure.”

“The trouble with it though is that that pleasure is this cruel form of pleasure. It's this always taunting, always nagging experience that people with a gambling use disorder or substance use disorder are experiencing, which is this nagging craving that I can satisfy in moments at a time, followed by feeling worse and then the craving returning. And this is happening for us over and over again. Revenge rumination, where we could ruminate on the same grievance for decades even, and never allowing it to go. I mean, blood feuds throughout history are based on

that idea of the scale is never balanced. Even when you get to the point of getting your revenge, there is no balance because you've just now created an all-new grievance and an all-new and balanced scale. So it's this cruel, torturous experience that humanity continues to put itself through.”⁷ Yet the way to feel better and stop the cycle is just to let go of the grievance.

Kimmel gives an example of this happening from history.

“In February 1945, as World War II was nearing its end in Europe, the leaders of the three major allied powers, the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union, met at the Yalta Conference in Crimea to discuss the terms of Germany's surrender. The Soviet premier, Joseph Stalin, wanted Germany to pay \$20 billion in reparations, the equivalent of \$333 billion in today's money. Such a demand would almost certainly have caused economic collapse in Germany. This seemed to be Joseph Stalin's goal—[not justice for oppressed people but revenge against the Oppressing Force]. Destroy Germany to ensure it could never rise again as a threat. In his eyes, Nazi

⁷ Hidden Brain Staff, “The Price of Revenge,” *Hidden Brain Podcast* (June 2, 2025), accessed on August 3,

2025 at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-price-of-revenge/>.

Germany had more than earned such punishment. But the Western allies were against this approach. They were not interested in punishing Germany. The war was almost over. They saw how the punitive terms imposed on Germany after World War I had backfired, leading to the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis. [Essentially Hitler's whole horrific plot was in retaliation to how the world punished Germany for beginning World War I. Hitler was mad about the Treaty of Versailles and that led to his revenge on millions of innocent people—inside and outside of his own country.] The United States and Britain wanted to do things a different way and this time focus on Europe's long-term stability, rather than look backwards at the death and destruction that Germany had caused.⁸

⁸ Hidden Brain Staff, "The Price of Revenge," *Hidden Brain Podcast* (June 2, 2025), accessed on August 3, 2025 at <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-price-of-revenge/>.

⁹ I love how pastor Eugene Peterson paraphrased this story in *The Message*:

⁵ Jonah went out of the city to the east and sat down in a sulk. He put together a makeshift shelter of leafy branches and sat there in the shade to see what would happen to the city.

⁶ God arranged for a broad-leafed tree to spring up. It grew over Jonah to cool him off and get him out of his angry sulk. Jonah was pleased and enjoyed the shade. Life was looking up.

⁷⁻⁸ But then God sent a worm. By dawn of the next day, the worm had bored into the shade tree and it withered away. The sun came up and God sent a hot, blistering wind from the east. The sun beat down on Jonah's head

So they tried a different approach and Germany has since taken accountability for its actions and they tell the story of their history to prevent it from happening again. In a way, the world forgiving Germany helped Germany come to a place where it could forgive itself—and stopped the revenge cycle in its tracks.

In the end, I think the story of Jonah is about God trying to help us ALL break this revenge cycle.

God uses a simple illustration to help Jonah reflect upon his behavior. A shade tree.⁹

God points out the fickleness of Jonah's attitude and behavior, how his anger changes on a whim based on whether he had shade or not. Showing how easy it was for Jonah to quickly change his feelings about a

and he started to faint. He prayed to die: "I'm better off dead!"

⁹ Then God said to Jonah, "What right do you have to get angry about this shade tree?" Jonah said, "Plenty of right. It's made me angry enough to die!"

¹⁰⁻¹¹ God said, "What's this? How is it that you can change your feelings from pleasure to anger overnight about a mere shade tree that you did nothing to get? You neither planted nor watered it. It grew up one night and died the next night. So, why can't I likewise change what I feel about Nineveh from anger to pleasure, this big city of more than 120,000 childlike people who don't yet know right from wrong, to say nothing of all the innocent animals?"

plant, God says God can change God's feelings too. Which, I think is really God's way to get Jonah to reflect about Nineveh. God is posing Godself as Jonah's enemy (Jonah is transferring all his anger onto God anyway!) but really Jonah's enemy is Nineveh. But by God saying God can change God's mind just like Jonah did about the shade tree, God is getting Jonah to see that Nineveh can change their minds too. Our enemies are just as human as we are. Or perhaps it's better said: we are just as human as our enemies are.

The point remains the same for all of us: If Jonah can change his attitude and behavior, so can everyone else—even the Ninevites, even you and me, even our enemies, even God.

Of course, we are left not knowing how Jonah responds. Perhaps that's because it takes time for us to stew in our anger and break our 'tit for tat' revenge cycle. Jonah sits with his anger awhile, I imagine. Just like we do.

The poem that Thomas John Carlisle penned about this part

of the story is brilliant. It's called "Coming Around":

And Jonah stalked
to his shaded seat
and waited for God
to come around
to his way of thinking.
And God is still waiting
for a host of Jonahs
in their comfortable houses
to come around
to [God's] way of loving.¹⁰

Wow.

God is waiting on us—all of us—to come around to God's way of loving.

Jesus came to earth to stop this cycle of harm and hate. Jesus, even as he was being crucified by the state in the most violent way possible, chose the Path of Peace. The Way of Love. The Way of Forgiveness: "*Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*"

We are called to do the same.

The Path of Love still has room, plenty of room, for holy anger and righteous indignation. It is NOT okay when Injustice occurs. The Path of Love creates space for us to be angry, while

¹⁰ Thomas John Carlisle, "Tantrum," *You! Jonah!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 1968.

putting up barriers against any kind of vengeance or retaliation.

So what about these countries and leaders who are hurting and harming so many people right now?

Well, yeah. It's enraging. It's devastating. It's disheartening. It's fear-inducing. It's sickening. And yet—if all the sudden Immigrants were safe in our country, and Palestinian children in Gaza were being given food, and Ukrainians could live in peace, and abused folks were no longer being abused, and disenfranchised people were no longer being discriminated against—our call, as followers of Christ, is to celebrate. To rejoice in the freeing of the Oppressed. Not to call for punishment of the Oppressor. If the Good News is Good for us, then it's Good for Everyone. Even the Ninevites—of Jonah's day and our day.

And trust me, I get it. This Good News is tension-filled truth. It does not always feel good or make sense to us, but our feelings about the Good News is not what makes it Good. God's grace does. God's grace is not doled out based on who deserves it or doesn't; God's grace is freely shared with all

people, even those we don't think deserve it.

So here's our challenge.

Don't we want the world to be full of Good News? Then let's shout it from the rooftops when we hear it. And yes, that even means speaking positively when the Leader or Administration whose actions on 99 things you cannot respect does 1 thing you can. Name the positive. Name the good. Celebrate the change, the transformation. Remember that this is a beloved child of God who God is celebrating. Just like the father celebrated the prodigal son returning home, without punishing him for his wayward journey—so too, are we called to celebrate every Good Action and Good Behavior that we see in the world—no matter who it comes from.

It does not validate injustice to celebrate justice—even if both are coming from the same person. As hard as it is, we must ensure we never being to dehumanize those who dehumanize others. When we see a person who has done a lot of evil things and then we start to proclaim that they themselves *are evil*, then we are predestining them to an identity

and claim on their life that is opposed to what Christ calls us to.

“*Repent,*” Jesus say. Stop the cycle. Turn around your mind. Literally. Change your thinking, your perspective. Sometimes the thing we need to repent the most about—is how we view those who we deem are our enemies or those who we deem are doing so much evil in the world that we think they are evil.

And yes, I wrote the sermon I needed to hear today, too, Calvary. It is not easy. Far from it. But it’s not called Easy News is it. It’s Good News.

Good News for...
 ...the Ninevites.
 ...the Animals.
 ...the Leaders who lead by Dictating and Abusing Authority.
 ...the Countries that are dropping bombs.
 ...the Friend who has betrayed you.
 ...and yes Good News even to you and to me.

In the end, Thomas John Carlisle’s poem “Limitation” sums up the book of Jonah for us perfectly:

God changed [God’s] mind because they had changed their hearts.

[God] repented because they repented. [Well...] That is the way *we* word it sometimes.

But always [the truth has remained the same]: [God] is limited only by [God’s] limitless love.¹¹

God is limited only by God’s limitless love.

May we find ourselves embraced in this limitless love—and the rest of the world too.

Amen.

¹¹ Thomas John Carlisle, “Tantrum,” *You! Jonah!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 1968.