

There's an image I find helpful in illustrating God's perspective of the world. Imagine a person standing in a vast and intricate library, surrounded by countless books. Each book represents a human life, containing every detail of that individual's experiences, choices, and emotions. The person in the library has the ability to open any book at any time, gaining a complete understanding of the person's past, present, and future.

The person in the library represents God's perspective, where time, space, and the depth of understanding transcend human limitations. From that vantage point, God comprehends the interconnectedness of all lives and the great tapestry of existence.

That may not be a perfect image, but it gives a sense of the contrast between God's view of the world and that of Jonah in our story this morning. God is so much greater than we are. God's love is far more inclusive and expressive than our love. It extends to people we might have difficulty loving. God understands other people the way we don't. Therefore, God is more forgiving than us, more hopeful. God's vision of what is possible is far more expansive than our vision.

Today, we didn't read the part of Jonah's story where he was swallowed by a whale, but it makes for a great children's story. I have a children's book at home. There's a picture of Jonah inside the whale leaning up against one of the whale's ribs, looking quite comfortable. However, the book of Jonah deals with some very grown-up themes.

One of those themes is the ancient hatred between the Nation of Israel and the Assyrian Empire. Jonah hated the Ninevites. His perspective on them was limited to the knowledge that Nineveh was part of the Assyrian Empire, who in 721 BC conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and took the ten tribes into captivity.

Jonah didn't know the Ninevites as people, their worries and their hopes. He could not fathom a world in which the Nation of Israel and the people of Nineveh could coexist peacefully. He thought too small. There's an old story about two buddies that go fishing one day. One of them catches this really big fish, but he throws it back. A little while later, he catches another enormous fish and throws that one back. This keeps happening until his buddy speaks up.

He asks, “You’re catching some amazing fish. Why do you keep throwing back fish that are so big?” His friend says, “Because my pan, at home, is only this big.” That’s a well-known story illustrating limited thinking or the propensity to think too small. We’re limited in ways that God is not.

We read that Nineveh is a “wicked” city. The sin and depravity of Nineveh was so great, God was ready to destroy the whole city. However, going back to the library image, each of the 120,000 inhabitants of that city was a book in God’s library, a book for whom God was the author. God didn’t want to punish them. They were children of God, just like Jonah and his people. Therefore, God called Jonah to go there and get the city to repent of their sin before it was too late.

But Jonah couldn’t bring himself to do it. In fact, seeing Nineveh get wiped off the face of the earth would’ve been just fine with him. They were the enemy. In his mind, they deserved it. So, he fled from his God given task by boarding a ship going in the opposite direction.

Those of us who grew up learning about Jonah in Sunday school know that because Jonah ran from the task God gave him, a mighty storm tossed the ship threatening the death of everyone on board. When Jonah let on that the cause of the storm might be his disobedience, the ship’s crew threw him overboard. That’s when Jonah was swallowed up by a whale.

On a side note, if you ever find yourself in the midst of a storm, it could be because someone is running from their God-given task. That’s a whole other sermon, but the next time a storm blows up in your life, if it’s not you running from God, it might be someone who’s in the same boat as you.

We might look at all the conflict and violence and polarization in our world as a storm. Could it be that we, as human beings, are thinking too small? Do we assume God disapproves of all the same people we disapprove of? Can we even envision a world in which enemies coexist together peacefully?

Because God’s love and God’s vision are so much greater than ours, we’re always being challenged to broaden our own. We see it in the teachings of Jesus. He didn’t leave it at the command: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” as hard as that might be. He took it a step farther saying, “Love your enemies and pray for them.”

His love was so expansive and his vision for what was possible was so much greater than that of his disciples, they often found themselves in uncomfortable situations. Jesus required them to go to scary or unfamiliar places. They were asked to minister to people whom they did not necessarily approve.

In our reading today, God gave Jonah a second chance. God did not give up on him. God didn't judge him too harshly. God knew that sometimes human beings don't get it right the first time. For any of us who feel we haven't been so faithful, or we missed a great opportunity, the Lord probably hasn't given up on us. God offers second chances.

This time Jonah responded to the call. I guess three days in the belly of a whale changes a person. He goes to Nineveh and cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Much to Jonah's chagrin, the Ninevites responded in amazing ways. They proclaimed a fast. Everyone put on sackcloth. Even the King responded. When the news reached the King, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And when God saw what they did, how they turn from their evil ways, God forgave them.

I think the power of the story is that it challenges us to think about how we are like Jonah. Do we have a judgmental spirit towards certain people? Are we willing to write off others we consider unredeemable? Do we hold grudges? Should God not forgive others, the way God forgives us? Should God only have compassion for the people for whom we have compassion?

God's love and God's vision for what was possible were far greater than Jonah's. Frankly, they're far greater than ours. The question is, can we get beyond our own biases and assumptions to see the world more like God sees it and treat people more like the way God treats others?

I'll never forget learning about the Apollo 8 flight in the last week of December 1968. In the movie, Tom Hanks played Captain Jim Lovell. Some of you will remember, 1968 was a difficult year in the U.S. with political assassinations, riots, and opposition to the Vietnam War.

The flight crew was astounded by their view of the moon. Then Lovell described, "As we kept going, suddenly on the lunar horizon, coming up, was Earth." He remembered the vivid contrast between the lifeless moon and the vibrant earth. He said, "The moon is

nothing but shades of gray and darkness. But the earth—you could see the deep blues of the seas, the whites of the clouds, the salmon pink and brown of the land masses."

Captain Lovell said, "At one point I sighted the earth with my thumb—and my thumb from that distance fit over the entire planet. I realized how insignificant we all are if everything I'd ever known is behind my thumb."

That moment changed him. He couldn't see any national borders. He couldn't see any boundaries we put in place. It was as if he was seeing the earth from God's perspective and realizing that every bit of it is precious. Lovell said that when the astronauts returned to earth, three days later, they were flooded with messages saying, "Thanks for saving 1968."

In some ways, nothing has changed since the time of Jonah. Hatred and envy and conflict plague our world, but God has given us a way to go beyond our own limitations. We can't see the way God sees, but we catch a glimmer.

God gave us Jesus to show us what it's like to love the way God loves. Jesus shows us what it's like to extend forgiveness the way God forgives. Jesus shows us how to give with generosity of spirit, the way God gives.

By actively engaging in our discipleship of Jesus Christ, we begin to view the world the way God views the world. Jesus allows us to extend our love farther. He allows us think bigger. He provides hope for tomorrow.