

The Annoyingly Lavish Mercy of God

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[0 : 00] So what I want to do today is to move us into a mini-series of sorts, kind of like a postlude, you might call it.

Since the beginning of September, we've been focusing somewhat inwardly as a church. On Sundays, Pastor Anthony and I have been attempting to ground this community in a set of values that seem fitting for who we are and for who we want to become.

We've talked about these values as holy habits, radical friendship and revolutionary justice, relentless curiosity and restorative play and rooted improvisation.

These are the values that we want to embody for this season. Yet, even with that discerning of the present moment and the future that we are invited into, we're also in this moment of celebrating our 10th anniversary as a church.

Yeah, 10. It's appropriate. That's right. There's 10 years of service of people showing up Sunday after Sunday to serve. 10 years of multiple places.

[1 : 23] This community has been in like six locations, they said last night. 10 years of faith formation. 10 years of ups and downs and joy and pain.

10 years of faith formation. Through all of that, this church has been present in this city. It has been witnessing, for sure, through cracked people and cracked ideas and even cracked hope.

But witnessing, nevertheless, that has managed for so many of us to let the light in. And, on top of all that, considering the present moment and considering the past, we're also embodying our dreams about the future.

Where, last Sunday, a few of you might have been there when we began the process of relaunching our Sunday morning service at D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School.

We sat in this elementary school gym. I love kind of unformed spaces. It was an elementary school gym. A space that, you know, I think is pretty well suited for learning and unlearning and curiosity and play and creativity.

[2 : 37] And we worshipped and we heard the gospel preached. And we remembered the Lord's death and resurrection through communion. And, of course, we ate pizza.

Celebration of the past and celebration and consideration of the present. All of those things, considering the future, have been mingling in this season in this extraordinarily delicious way.

Yet, even as we consider these ten years, as we consider our values and our new location, as we've turned inward, it feels right in this moment, maybe not to leave this moment, this string of preaching, this introspective time without us naming one more critical reality of our current and likely future.

It's simple. We're becoming a more intercultural church. Now, let me say something here really clearly.

And that is that through the history of this church, through various locations, various expressions, it seems to me that the table has always had what I think of as like an intercultural edge.

[3 : 57] And there's been deep beauty in that. Even so, I think it's important to name that this church has been and still at this moment is a majority white space, by numbers, by cultural expression, even as a lot of that is changing pretty quickly.

Increasingly, we're using this language of centering the margins as we communicate. And while there are lots of people at different kinds of margins, because of the way our society is set up, we have to be talking about the margins of culture and race consistently.

So, as I've been reflecting on these five church values that we're trying to live into, as we become a more intercultural church, I've realized that there are a few temptations that concern me.

So, I'm going to name those two temptations, and then I'm going to get into our text of today, which is a fun book, the book of Jonah. Yes! So, the first of the temptations that I've realized, the things that concern me, is that being clear about the beauty and the joy of this place, the scriptural example of intercultural community, in doing all of that, we can prematurely conclude that we're already embodying what Dr. King calls, called the beloved community.

We can all too easily minimize the difficulty of actually achieving the beloved community. We, though we might be a little bit hesitant to admit it, can let the framework of racial reconciliation, a framework that was made extremely popular in the evangelical world by the promise keepers movement, some of y'all might have heard of that, in the 90s, we can let that framework give us the most concrete images of what beloved community looks like.

[6 : 14] How many of us have sat in Christian conferences or in sanctuaries where the theater of racial reconciliation always looked, usually, almost always looked, like a white person and a black person, almost always men, dialoguing about mutual feelings of hurt and then hugging it out, and a hug it out.

Yet, according to someone who I think is brilliant, the Dr. Shadequa Walker-Barnes, in her vision of reconciliation that's grounded in a theology known as womanism, here's what she says.

Reconciliation is not a destination or a fixed point in time, but is rather a developmental process, a journey that requires, one, confrontational truth-telling, two, liberation and healing for the oppressed, three, repentance and conversion for the oppressor, and four, building beloved community.

Notice that the building of beloved community is the very last step in the process. And it can be really easy to forget that.

Becoming more intercultural as a church, that is, having more folks from different cultural backgrounds see this church as home, does not mean that we are necessarily moving toward beloved community.

[7 : 53] In fact, if we actually are intentionally moving toward beloved community, I'm starting to think that early on, it might actually feel like a curse.

And that's the point that Walker-Barnes makes in her commentary on one of the most famous scenes from the book, *The Color Purple*.

Now, if you met me, you might know that I'm one of those people that if you have not read *The Color Purple* or at least seen the movie, I might bring you to my house right now. Like, it is canon. It is high on the list, right?

So she quotes this moment, this confrontational moment of truth-telling that forms the turning point in that book of Sealy, or when Sealy tells her abuser, Albert, this.

Here's what she says. I curse you, I say. And she's talking to her abuser. She's talking to somebody who suppressed her. What that mean, he say.

- [9 : 01] I say, I say, until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. He laugh. Who you think you is, he say.
- You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black. You poor. You ugly. You a woman. Goddamn, he say.
- You nothing at all. Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me.
- And it seemed to come from the trees. I'm poor. I'm black. I may be ugly and can't cook. A voice say to everything listening.
- But I'm here. Amen, says Shug. Amen. Amen. What I don't want you to miss is that at the beginning of this road to genuine, beloved community, the kind of community where the predator lays down with the prey, the beginning of that road can feel like a curse in terms of what we've been taught about security and well-being and in terms of how it just feels in our bodies.
- [10 : 32] And so that brings me to the second temptation that concerns me when it comes to becoming an intercultural church. We do sometimes talk about how the road to beloved community can feel like a curse to white people.
- But we don't often talk at least publicly about the ways it can feel like that for people of color. There's this tendency to talk about intercultural church and the road to beloved community from the perspective of how white people are affected.
- And as in so much else, whoever holds the most power controls the contours of the conversation. But I'm deeply concerned in this moment about how we, the people of color in this congregation, can more fully frame and be honest about how we are affected.
- What we gain, what we lose, what we hope for, what we grieve. You've heard me talk about this before, but earlier this year, I got invited to be on a panel, in a panel discussion that was to take place after the DC screening of the film Pray Away.
- Pray Away is this documentary about the ex-gay movement told mostly through the perspective of conversion therapy survivors.
- [12 : 03] And after that film, after the film, after the panel discussion, I was mingling with a number of people in the room and I found myself in this one group of people, all women of color, from the table church.
- And we talked about the importance of the film and we talked about the importance of conversion therapy. And then someone definitively said something like this. Now, we need to go have our own conversation.
- We need to have our own panel discussion. See, the movie had been about conversion therapy, but it had only shown the way that that was practiced in these majority white communities.
- And for most people of color, the very same thing shows up in very different ways in church spaces. Things like casting out demons in front of a community.
- And yet, we never get to talk about that. There never seems to be enough space to talk about that. And I feel like I witness the same thing when I go to conferences or visit other churches.
- [13 : 18] Even when we are explicitly talking about race and justice, they are never talking to me. They are never talking for me. I am always overhearing the message that is not intended for me.
- They don't have somebody like me in mind. So I'm concerned that as we become more intercultural as a church, we talk about that. And we talk about it from the perspective, too, of people of color.

So that's what I'm going to do today. Because I think it's so easy to overlook, and we don't talk about this, but to overlook the discipleship needs even in a church like this that consists of lots of different people, of people of color.

I think one of the greatest possible tragedies of pursuing this path is that we only ever allow black people and people of Asian descent and indigenous people and Latinx folks to be formed secondarily.

in intercultural community, we can allow even their Christian formation to require more work than it does for everybody else.

[14 : 36] So, because of that danger, the preaching team, we just had a preaching team meeting. One of the things we're going to do in the next year is try to work toward, try to make sure that our preaching series and the scriptures we choose are reflective of our congregation and how all of us need to be formed.

And because of that danger, what I'm going to do in the remainder of the time that I have is to explore some of the challenges of getting to beloved community but from the perspective of the cultural margins.

These are unfinished thoughts that I'm going to share. They're kind of musings things. And I'm going to go to kind of bounce off an odd place in scripture and that place is the book of Jonah.

So, we're going to go to Jonah 1, 1 through 10. If you have a Bible, you have a screen, let's go there. So, this is Jonah 1, 1 through 10.

Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai, saying, Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.

[15 : 50] But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish, so he paid his fare and went on board to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ships threatened to break up. Then the sailors were afraid and each cried to his God.

They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep.

The captain came and said to him, What are you doing, sound asleep? Get up! Call on your God! Perhaps the God will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.

The sailors said to one another, Come, let us cast lots so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us. So they cast lots and the lots fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, Tell us why this calamity has come upon us.

[16 : 59] What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you? I am a Hebrew, he replied. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.

Then the men were even more afraid and said to him, What is this you have done? For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord because he had told them so.

All right. So let's say what's clear. Jonah is an odd book.

The thing that probably most of us remember about this book is the well. a person, a fully alive human being is swallowed by a well, is in the well for three days, and then is spit out.

It often reads like a fairy tale, and for that reason, it's one of those stories that it gets easily relegated to, like, this is a children's story, or this is, you know, something we just keep in the back of our minds.

[18 : 10] But the Yantons would have understood this book as, like, an extended metaphor that uses hyperbole, that uses exaggeration to make a point. And the book is not just odd because of this, like, man-well situation.

It's also odd because it's a prophetic book that focuses not on the actual prophecy of a prophet, but on the prophet's actions, and actions that are contrary to what God is actually asking.

It's also odd because it starts in the middle of the action, and you get this very, like, the very beginning, now the word of the Lord came to Jonah.

Go at once to Nineveh and cry out against it, but Jonah set out to flee. Because the book is set in the middle of the action, it allows the reader, though, to fill in the gaps, and that's where this gets extremely interesting, particularly for people who are traditionally, who have traditionally been marginalized.

So what do we know here? Here's a basic story, at least of the first half of the book. The prophet Jonah is told by God to go to the city of Nineveh and to cry out against it because it's wicked.

[19 : 24] Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, this incredibly powerful empire of the day that was known for extreme brutality against its enemies and those it oppressed.

The book of Zephaniah and Nahum, those two books list the sins of Assyria as robbery and as oppression, which I would argue are often the two main sins of all empires throughout human history.

Robbery and oppression. But instead of going to this capital city, Jonah runs in the opposite direction. God pursues Jonah by creating the storm on the sea by which he thinks Jonah had thought would be his escape route.

The sailors who are not Israelites demonstrate, interestingly, more allegiance to the God of Israel than Jonah does as they try to survive the storm. And then at the end, at Jonah's own urging, the sailors throw Jonah overboard into the sea so that God's anger will pass them by.

And that's when Jonah is swallowed by the well. And then while inside, he prays this long prayer and the well spits him out.

[20 : 44] The last line of that prayer is that deliverance belongs to the Lord and perhaps he spit out because he knows that or at least he pretends to accept it.

So those are the basic facts from this first book of Jonah. I encourage you to read chapters 1 and 2 this week if you have a chance. Jonah is expected to preach to his enemies, but in the gaps of the story is what matters.

Jonah seems to know that as any Israelite would, that God is quick to relent from anger. One of the most important moments of God's self-disclosure in the book of Exodus says just that.

The Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

Now, the end of that, while it may be a little disturbing, it probably needs to be the subject of a whole other sermon, the accent there is on God's forgiveness.

[22 : 08] God is understood as holding accountable to the fourth generation, but a forgiving to the thousandth. God is so disturbed by God's lavish mercy.

Why is that such a problem? Well, because Jonah is fundamentally about the good of his people. He's a court prophet, which means he prophesies to the king directly.

Here's how the book of Second Kings helps us fill in the gaps in the story. In the 15th year of King Amaziah, son of Joash of Judah, King Jeroboam, son of Joash of Israel, began to reign in Samaria.

He reigned for 41 years. He restored the border of Israel from Lobahemoth, as far as the Sea of Ereba. according to the word of the Lord, the God of Israel, which he spoke by his servant, Jonah, son of Amittai, the prophet who was from Gath-Hefer.

Jonah is a prophet to the king of Israel. His prophecies strengthened his people and his nation. When he is told to go to the most oppressive empire of his day to cry out, he knows that the end of the story is likely to be the display of God's annoyingly lavish mercy.

[23 : 42] Jonah faces the dilemma that is fundamental to so many people of color as they move, as we move down the road toward beloved community.

The dilemma is how to relate God's lavish mercy in light of the need for deep accountability. ability. Maybe even more fundamentally, how to square the need to be faithful to one's own people with the calling to be faithful to the expansive vision of God's commonwealth of peace.

As Dr. Miguel de la Torre insightfully says, Jonah disobeyed God out of his deeper loyalty to his own people.

So several years ago, I had the privilege of attending the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, which is this gathering of black justice-oriented churches from across the country.

And the year I was there, the gathering took place in Birmingham. On the first night of the conference, we went to Birmingham, I'm sorry, we went to the 16th Street Baptist Church by bus, a church that had been the meeting place of many civil rights leaders and the same church that was bombed in September of 1963.

[25 : 12] It's the church in which the lives of four black girls were lost to the violence of white supremacist oppression. So several hundred of us gathered in the pews of that church, and there was this moment during that meeting when an extremely gifted organist began to play Lift Every Voice and Sing, the song that's often known as the Black National Anthem.

During the song, black faith leaders from all across that church, in this space that had been made sacred, they began to lift their hands and to form with their hands the black power fist.

And my fist shot into the air too. And between the music and the voices and that united physical expression, I felt this oneness. And it wasn't until after that conference, after that night, after that conference, that I started to begin to name more clearly the tension between loyalty to my own people and loyalty to the vision of God.

There was nothing in that moment that was inherently disloyal to the vision of God. God. Yet, from the part of my faith formation that took place in white churches, I had gained this conflicted feeling about which identity could or should be primary, my Christian one or my cultural one.

And this is the dilemma of Jonah. When asked by the sailors about his background, the first thing he says is, I am a Hebrew.

[27 : 11] Yet God asks of him something that seems to challenge that identity and potentially earn him the label that far too many of us are familiar with. Sell out.

So, Jonah flees. Maybe he flees because he knows that any change that comes from Nineveh as a result of his words will be shallow repentance. Maybe he flees because he needs to be faithful to his people to depart as many people of color have had to do from processes of reconciliation that only mask harm.

Next week, Shea Washington, one of our elders, is going to come and talk more about why Jonah had to flee and she'll talk about Nineveh's repentance and why Jonah becomes angry when that finally does happen.

And after the service next week, I'm specifically inviting people of color in this community to join for an after-church experience to discuss some of this among ourselves and the Asian American Affinity Group and the Black Affinity Group are supporting that, so mark your calendars, November 5th, after church.

We're going to talk more about this. But I want to close with this. The living out of intercultural community on the road to beloved community is always a flight into a tenuous space of the unknown for people of color.

[28 : 47] And we have to say that out loud. As with Jonah, it's this descent into the belly of the well. There are unique ways in which it can feel like death for many of us.

For us as people of color, it may often feel unfairly like having to bear a curse. And yet, the really wonderful thing, the good news, the good news that is central in the Christian imagination is that descent into the underworld, into the tension, into the in-betweenness, into the struggle with God, always holds the possibility for new life.

So I'm no longer sure that the main issue here with Jonah's behavior is his initial flight. These days, I actually wonder if the greater temptation is to avoid.

It's to go down into the belly of the ship and to fall asleep on the bottom of the boat. See, Jonah does come awake in the midst of the storm.

And he further comes awake in the belly of the well. He confronts his dilemma at first unwillingly, because the sailors have to wake him up, and then willingly through his speech and through his action.

[30 : 16] And what I want for us as people of color is this. honesty about how hard this can be.

And wakefulness through the joys and the sorrows. So here's my closing prayer. May the God of resurrection give us the strength to be faithful to our own people, our black and brown people of whatever shade or variety, and faithful to the vision of beloved community.

Amen.