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What a Friend Jesus Has
Jonah 3 and Mark 1:14-20
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I have a brother who is just two years younger than me. Today we have a pretty solid brother-sister relationship. I think we know that we can always go to one another for help, and we'll be there for each other. We might even like each other a little bit. But when we were children, nobody could get under my skin quite like my brother could. The way he made little noises when he chewed his food . . . the way he breathed . . . his very existence annoyed me. I remember he would taunt me on purpose to get me in trouble. He'd do something unforgivable, like put his feet on me, or lick his hand and wipe it on me, leaving me no choice but to hit him as hard as I could. Then he'd tell my parents, and I'd be the big bad sister who hurt the innocent little brother who just wanted my attention. It didn't matter at ALL that he had tormented me on purpose—that HE started it—I was the big sister, and I was supposed to know better. This was probably my first experience of radical injustice.

I remember complaining passionately to my mom one day about how awful my brother was, hoping for some sympathy and understanding. I was stunned when instead, she replied, “It hurts me when you talk about him like that.” I wanted her to see how right I was, and take my side, and instead, she came back at me with THAT.

When I became the mother of two girls, it was perfectly clear what she was talking about. I didn't care who started it—I just wanted my daughters to love each other. I didn't around quoting the Bible all the time, but one verse the girls heard from me more than once was Ephesians 4:32—“Be kind to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ, God forgave you.” As a parent, the best feeling in the world is when we see that our children care about each

other. This past Christmas, my older daughter Madeleine cried with laughter when she opened a bracelet from her sister that said, “Madeleine hearts Rachel” on it. Little did they suspect that Rachel’s gift and her sister’s affectionate response was also a gift for me.

Well, speaking of laughter, the book of Jonah, the source of our first scripture reading today, is one of the funniest books of the Bible. Straight-up satire. There’s a guy named Jonah, and God says to him, “Go to Nineveh and tell the people there how wicked they are,” which is a little bit like telling somebody to go to Las Vegas and tell everybody how terrible gambling is. Jonah promptly hops on a ship going in the opposite direction, as far from Nineveh as it was humanly possible to get. God sends a mighty storm, which Jonah sleeps right through, until the sailors wake him up. Then Jonah tells the sailors to throw him into the sea, which instantly calms the storm, and God sends a fish to swallow up Jonah, and after three days the fish spits him up onto the land, no harm done. God repeats his original message to Jonah, and this time, Jonah goes. He’s not happy about it, but he goes and does what God says, AND--

A miracle happens. The people listen to this Israelite foreigner. They believe him! One part of the story that the lectionary skips over is that the KING of Nineveh sees what’s going on and he gets on board, too. He says, “Everybody, every person and every animal, is going to repent. We’re going to fast. We’re going to wear sackcloth. We’re going to cry out to God. We’re going to stop being so violent and terrible to each other. And who knows? Maybe God will change his mind.” And they do. And God DOES! And this makes Jonah MAD, because he thought God was going to destroy the place, and then there’s a funny scene with a bush and a worm and Jonah complaining a lot, and the story ends with God saying to Jonah, “Shouldn’t I care about a city with 120,000 people in it, as well as many animals?”

There are a variety of insights to gain from this story, but the one I want us to really hear this morning is that God SAW what the people did. Their behavior AFFECTED God. And God changed his mind.

In our Gospel story, Jesus walks along the beach, sees some fishermen, and calls them to join him in his mission. Jesus had been baptized by John; he had spent his 40 days in the wilderness alone; he knows his message; now he needs a team. He needs some buddies to go along with him. Now, the author of the Gospel of Mark is not a details kind of guy. We don't know if Jesus maybe asked some other guys first, and they turned him down, or if these four are his first choice. We don't know if Jesus has met these guys before, and there's already a connection there—I would think so. But no matter how it happened, isn't it kind of fun to imagine Jesus grinning really big when Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, say yes and join him. Don't you think it must have made his day? Don't you think it must have given him a shot of encouragement for the difficult road ahead? Jesus was a human being; human beings need community; even Jesus needed community.

There are a number of different directions we could go with our two stories, but what stood out to me given the reality of the world today and church today is what these stories say about God and relationships. Because God loves us so much, God is affected by what we do. God is affected by what we do to each other. Like a concerned parent, God hates it when we hurt each other, and loves it when we're good to one another. God's own being is relational; one God in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When Jesus called his first disciples, he didn't say, "Let's discuss a checklist of ideas and beliefs that you need to agree with." He just walked alongside them and included them in what he was doing.

We're learning that there's an epidemic of loneliness today. I found some interesting statistics, including these: 42.6 million adults over the age of 45 in the United States are estimated to be suffering from loneliness. A quarter of our population lives alone, which is not the same as being lonely, but can make people more vulnerable to loneliness. The number of Americans with no close friends has tripled since 1985. And as hard as the elderly have been hit by loneliness, it's even worse for millennials, in part due to the internet, which provides endless distraction and surface-level companionship, but doesn't provide the same benefits as live, face to face friendships.

It gets worse. Loneliness is contagious. If you aren't lonely but you are connected to someone who is, like a friend, or a neighbor, or co-worker, your chances of becoming lonely yourself increase by 50%. Also, the more lonely someone is, the more likely other people are to avoid them. And now scientists are discovering that loneliness is an even greater health hazard than obesity. You are more likely to die earlier if you are lonely.

I hear that, and I think, wow, what an amazing opportunity for the church. There are other organizations that do a more efficient job than most local churches of providing food, clothing, and shelter to people in need. Even so, it is part of our calling to develop and invest in ministries that help people with material needs.

But when it comes to the need for friendship, for belonging, for connection and a listening ear, that's where the church can really shine . . . if we choose. We exist because of a man who was all about relationships. We worship a God who cares deeply about how we relate to each other, who is already in a relationship with us whether we realize it or not, and whose very essence, as we see in the Trinity, is relationship. If we excel at nothing else, shouldn't we excel at friendship? At looking out for people who don't have anybody else to care? At seeking

out and showing patience with those who are suffering from loneliness, and bringing them into our own circles, so that no one person bears the entire burden of another person's loneliness, but the whole group is in it together? If we ourselves are lonely, can we at least be honest about it, and talk with someone about why that is?

10:30 (Right before Christmas we had a memorial service here in this sanctuary for Louise Corrick, a woman who lived for more than a century, who was a member of our church for more than 70 years. Some of you were at that service, and you nodded in agreement when I said that if you had met Louise, you were her friend. I mentioned how a lot of people, when they live a life as long as Louise's, tend to outlive their friends, and their world becomes smaller. This did not happen with Louise, because she just kept making new friends. She didn't retreat to a small, closed circle of familiar faces. If she had an opportunity to make a new friend, she took it, and made the most of it. More of us, including me, would be very wise to follow her example.)

Here's a juicy challenge for us this year (I've given challenges before, but this one is going to stretch some of us a little bit): make a new friend. Make a new friend here at this church. Whether you're brand new or you've been coming for 50 years, get to know someone that you don't yet know very well. Meet them for coffee, or visit for a while after worship in Disciples Hall. Go to a Sunday School class or a concert and sit with them. Write them a friendly note-you can use one of the caring cards in the pews. Find out when their birthday is, and send them a card. Pray for them. Include them in your lunch group, if you regularly go out to lunch with a group of friends. Send them a text every now and then. You don't have to overdo it, but make a good effort.

You'll notice I did NOT say, make a new friend who's NOT from the church. That's a good challenge, too. But for now, let's see how each of us making a commitment to seek out a new friend might communicate a fresh, new, welcoming vibe to newcomers and visitors.

10:30 (I'd like to issue a smaller challenge to go along with this bigger one. Ali Decker does a lot of great things at this church. One of the little things she does is actually a really big thing, Ali wears her nametag. She wears it every single Sunday, and to nearly every church event, if she remembers. Now, just about everybody knows Ali by now, but by continuing to wear her nametag anyway, she's saying that she cares about new people who have no clue who she is. She's ready to be known, and to know you—she's open to making new friends. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, if nothing else, can we please take a moment each Sunday to put on our nametags? If you can't find it, call the church office tomorrow and we will have one ready for you in just a few days at NO cost to you.)

Jesus calls us to follow him. To let go of things that weigh us down and don't work anymore, and to set out on new, life-giving pathways. And he calls us to do it together. As friends. As a holy community. As brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us pray:

Jesus, you are calling to us every day. You invite us to walk with you . . . to be your friend . . . to reach out as you reached out . . . to bring the good news of your love and acceptance to lonely, isolated people and to let ourselves be touched by the concern of others amidst our own loneliness. May lonely people find heart-felt, genuine relationships here. May our treatment of our brothers and sisters bring pride and joy to you, Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

