

“I think if Americans would love their neighbor like they’d like to be loved themselves, a lot of the division in our society would end.” Simple, succinct, and the absolute truth. It’s not a quote from an inauguration speech, it’s not a quote from a news pundit, it’s a quote taken from a short conversation between three men, three men who for all intents and purposes just looked like three guys standing around having a chat, but who were really three men talking together on some of the most hallowed ground in this country, reflecting on a day which to them, meant so much more because they were some of the few that acutely knew what it felt like to stand up and take the oath of office, and thus the weight of the country upon their shoulders.

It’s highly possible you might have missed this conversation if you didn’t stick around until the end of the Inauguration Day festivities. It was a short video clip aired near the end of the Inauguration Concert, one that was filmed earlier in the day, a conversation between Presidents Clinton, W. Bush, and Obama at Arlington National Cemetery where the three of them just stood around and reflected on unity, the meaning of the day, and their own memories of their inauguration. That’s actually where the quote comes from, their memories of their own days. President Obama was saying how it showed him the true meaning of the fact that we can have disagreements and

still treat each other with grace, how different people can approach the office differently, but at the end of the day one of the things that is so beautiful about America is that honestly we have more in common than what separates us. It was from that vein of conversation that President Bush stepped in with that quote. “I think if Americans would love their neighbor like they’d like to be loved themselves a lot of the division in our society would end.” I mean it seems so simple, so legitimately true. We all know how we ourselves want to be loved, so if we just extend that same hand to our neighbor, we’re honestly gonna be alright, but somehow...we can never quite manage to get there. And honestly, we’re not the first, because people have been like this long before us, people have been like this since God sent whales to swallow cranky, grouchy, resistant prophets.

You all know...I love me some Jonah. I love how just completely *annoying* he is, honestly. I love his humanity and his feistiness and his just general level of angst with the whole world, but what frustrates the daylight out of me is that if you only met Jonah through our lessons today, you would think that he was just the world’s best prophet, happy to go along with God’s plan and bask in the glow of success, when that could not be further from the truth. Our lesson completely bypasses the heart and soul of the story, that Jonah was so entirely uninterested in taking the word of God to a bunch of

foreigner sinners in Ninevah that he hopped a boat going in the polar opposite direction, that Jonah got thrown overboard off of said boat only to be swallowed by a gigantic fish and kept there for three days in order for God to *finally* get it through his head that he had to go to Ninevah. *Then*, after he was arguably the Bible's most successful prophet, one day of preaching and an entire city of pagans converts!, he marches out of town and just tears into God about how angry he is that God didn't destroy them all. He screams that this was why he didn't want to come in the first place, because he knew God would be gracious and merciful! He tells God he is angry enough to *die* because what was the point of sending him here to preach destruction and gloom if God was just going to change God's mind?!

Jonah lacks the fundamental ability to recognize that all this grace and all this love that he just witnessed God giving to the people of Ninevah is the *exact* same love and grace that he received in the belly of the big fish. That he *keeps* receiving as he stands on the outskirts of the city railing and screaming against God. Over and over again, God keeps showing Jonah love and forgiveness and far more grace than anyone would say he is deserving of, and Jonah keeps just focusing on how ridiculous it is that a bunch of foreigners in some far away city got the same treatment. Jonah cannot see exactly what President Bush was talking about. God loves the

people of Ninevah the exact same way that God loves Jonah, and one would bet that Jonah appreciates that love, that that's *how* he wants to be loved, with a love that doesn't abandon him, that doesn't leave him in a whale to die, but keeps giving him chance after chance after chance to get it right, but he refuses to acknowledge that other people need that kind of love too, even if those people are different from him, even if those people have sinned more than him in his opinion, even if he doesn't like them. How might Jonah have felt leaving the city walls of Ninevah knowing he had helped save hundreds of thousands of people from destruction if he had taken a step back and seen that they need to be loved in the same he needs love? He might have felt a little bit like Peter, Andrew, James, and John being called by Jesus to drop their nets and start fishing for people.

The disciples, these rough and rugged fishermen are some of the first ones to actually get it, to understand at least on some level what Jesus is talking about when says that God has come near and there is good news to share. The four of them recognize immediately that in Jesus, in his message, in his good news, there is something that they need, something that will fill them and find them and give them purpose, but what makes them so different from Jonah is that they recognize that *others* need that same love and grace and message too. Jesus tells them to leave everything behind for

the sake of sharing the good news, to leave their livelihoods, their certainty, their comfort zones so that they can now start catching people in the net of good news. Somehow they see that what they need from Jesus isn't something for them to hoard, isn't something that only they are deserving of, isn't something that they want to deny others. They're willing to step out of their boats, rather than staying in them and rowing as far away as possible, in order to create more space for the kingdom of God grow. The disciples know how they want to be loved, they see it in Jesus in an instant, and they're willing to stake their lives on a commitment to making sure that others feel the same way, experience the same thing.

In our heart of hearts, we know more often than not that we aren't Peter, we aren't Andrew, we aren't James, we aren't John...we're Jonah. We are Jonah down to our cores sometimes. We love that God loves us so much, and we take it for all it's worth, stretching out that love and grace and forgiveness so that it paints every fiber, every cell of our lives. We are happy to take in the good news we hear every Sunday, to embrace it and say yes, thank you, Jesus that you have brought forgiveness into the world, thank you for loving me, as messed up and broken as I am. But man, when we're asked to turn that love around for others? To acknowledge that God's love, God's good news is the same for others as it is for us? Oh no, the second we

get that message we suddenly look like a Bernie Sanders meme, arms folded, unmoving like, nope, I'm just gonna sit here and look grouchy because that's a mission I'm uninterested in.

We are so unbelievably certain that we know how others deserve to be treated in this world, the hand that they should be dealt from God. Jonah felt the same way. He looked at Ninevah and saw a city that deserved to burn, a city that deserved nothing but the destruction that was allegedly coming for it. He saw unrepentant people who didn't know God and who probably had no interest in what God had to say, and so what else could they deserve but to be wiped clean off the slate. What Jonah failed to see was that he had just spent how many months of his life running away from God, living in a way that was in no way deserving of all the second chances he got. If Ninevah wasn't deserving of grace, then neither was he. But thank God for all of us that God doesn't give us what we deserve.

The truth of the matter is, none of us *deserve* the grace, the love, the forgiveness that God gives us over and over and over again. And frankly not deserving it has nothing to do with our skin color or our political beliefs or our gender or our sexual orientation or our economic status or any other division that we drive between ourselves and declare that somehow one is better than the other. No, we don't deserve those things because the world is

a broken place filled with broken humans who just can't seem to stop breaking things. But God looks beyond the broken tatters of our lives and our actions to the heart of who we are and always ends up at the same place, here are people that need to be loved, over and over again until they finally get it. Until they finally get that how they are loved by me is how they should love one another, plain and simple.

I want you to ask yourself: how would you like to be loved? I would guess that all of our answers would generally be the same: unconditionally, wholly, for who we truly are without caveats or expectations, for who we are without being told we have a certain mold we have to fit into. The good news is that that is how you are loved, each and every moment of each and every day by God. But here's the thing, that's how our siblings want to be loved too, and it's true they are. God loves them the same way that God loves us. However, how might the world be different if we dared to love each other like that? How might our days be different if we dared to show just a sliver of that kind of love to all of our siblings, not just those that we thought were deserving? How might the world itself shift if we stopped walking through it like we were treading through Ninevah with angst and frustration, but instead that our feet were brushing the banks of the sea where we dared to drop our nets and be caught up in love? **AMEN!!!**