

Faith in Real Life: Stories of Hope for a Messed-Up World

Part 5: Real Faith Loves Without Limits

Jonah

Summary: When God's love feels unfair, real faith means trusting a love that reaches even the people we'd rather exclude.

Main Ideas:

A life of faith is often a life of frustration.

a lot of us feel like a "fair" God would love some people more than others.

God's love is offensively inclusive.

God's heart is always for people, whether they deserve it or not.

We are often more eager to see God's justice against our enemies than his mercy

Our quest for justice can make us think we are holier than God.

God's love is often easier to receive than to give.

Real faith is about learning to love others like God loves us.

Real faith loves, and then leaves the results to God.

God's love isn't something to hoard. It's something to share.

Invitation:

Is there someone or even a group you avoid, judge, or struggle to love?

Pray for them.

Do something loving.

Discussion Questions:

1. What's something in life right now that feels "unfair" to you? How do you usually respond to that?
2. Why do you think we care so much about fairness, even though we know "life isn't fair"?
3. Read Luke 6:36. Why do you think mercy is so central to what it means to live out real faith?
4. Jon said: "Real faith loves, and then leaves the results to God." What would it look like for you to live that out this week?
5. How can your group pray with you this week?

Transcript:

WE: Have you ever been frustrated with God?

- I know I have. There are some things God and I are working through right now.

If God really is all-powerful, all-knowing, the One who created everything and sits outside of time itself...

- Doesn't it make sense that sometimes, we just won't get what he's doing?

And honestly, it can be frustrating.

- Why do the wrong people sometimes seem to succeed?
- Why is there so much pain, so much tragedy?

- Why does God seem silent in the times we need him most?
- And...what's the deal with mosquitoes and wasps?

A life of faith is often a life of frustration.

- Because we trust, have hope... but we still don't have all the answers.

If any story captures the frustration and mystery of faith, it's Jonah's.

- One of the strangest and most misunderstood stories in the biblical writings.
- People have debated for centuries about whether the story is historical or symbolic
- B/c it involves a guy getting swallowed by a big fish.

I tend to believe it's something that happened, b/c Jesus alludes to it being real, and if someone can predict their death and resurrection and pull it off... I'm gonna take his word for just about everything.

But maybe you're not there yet... that's totally ok.

- You're in great company.

If the big fish part of this story is hard for you to swallow...

- I want to invite you to see this as a story with a message/lesson

And honestly, the fish part isn't even the hardest part of the story to believe... It's what the whole story was actually written to show us...

- God's love isn't fair.

B/c fairness is such a big deal for us...

- We learn it from a young age
- How many parents get sick of their kids shouting... "That's not fair!"
- And our response? Life's not fair.

But deep down, do we really believe that?

- When we see unfairness in movies, in headlines, in workplaces, in families, it makes us angry.
- Why? Because justice and fairness feel like they ought to be the rule.

But with God, it gets even trickier.

Deep down, if we're honest, a lot of us feel like a "fair" God would love some people more than others.

- The 'good' should get rewarded. The 'bad' should get what's coming to them.
- Like a sort of cosmic karma.
- That seems fair...right?

And most of us put ourselves on the 'deserving' list and those we dislike or disagree with on the 'undeserving' list."

Jonah saw it the same way: God's love should go to the people who earn it... The rest should be smited.

And the most frustrating part of his story is when he finally realizes...God's love is bigger than fair... God's love is offensively inclusive.

We see this play out in the first sentence in Jonah's story...

GOD: *Jonah 1:1-2 The LORD gave this message to Jonah son of Amittai: "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh. Announce my judgment against it because I have seen how wicked its people are."*

So this takes place around 800-700 BC.

- Jonah is a prophet of God... Someone chosen to speak for God

And God tells Jonah he has a message for the Assyrians... so go to their capital, Nineveh.

- Modern Day Mosul, Iraq

The Assyrian Empire was the largest empire in history up to that point

- And they didn't get there by loving their neighbor.

Were infamous for their brutality...

- Mass executions, skinning people alive, impalement, and displaying severed heads on city walls.

The Assyrian Empire rose to power by controlling and killing people.

- People God created. People God loved.

But this empire and its capital, Nineveh, were also made up of people.

- People God created. People God loved.
- God's heart is always for people, whether they deserve it or not.

So God tells Jonah to go tell the Assyrians that if they don't change their ways, they will be destroyed.

- Wanting them to repent. To save both the Assyrians and their victims.

God wants Jonah to offer these brutal people... mercy.

Jonah wants no part of this. They don't deserve a warning, let alone mercy. They deserve judgment

So he thinks to himself... If I don't go to Nineveh and warn them, they won't have a chance to repent, and then God will destroy them.

So Jonah schemes up what he probably thinks is a great plan...

Jonah 1:3 *But Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction to get away from the LORD. He went down to the port of Joppa, where he found a ship leaving for Tarshish. He bought a ticket and went on board, hoping to escape from the LORD by sailing to Tarshish.*

Jonah doesn't just refuse to do what he's told... he goes to Tarshish, the furthest place you could imagine from Nineveh.

- [Show map of the Mediterranean with Ninevah and Tarshish.]
- Like God saying Go to New York, and you buy a ticket to go to Hong Kong.

For a long time, I thought this next part of Jonah's story was mainly about the consequences of running from God.

- Like, disobey and you end up in trouble.

But when I really looked at it, I realized this is about how far God will go, not just to get Jonah's attention, but to show love to people everyone else has given up on.

- God will do whatever it takes to save his people.
- Even and especially if it's someone no one expects.

God sends a storm that threatens to break the ship apart

- The sailors are terrified and desperately start throwing cargo overboard, hoping to survive.

In their thinking, it must be some kind of supernatural punishment... they cast lots to see who angered their god.

- Lands on Jonah
- "Who are you? And what did you do?"
- "I'm a prophet running from God."
- "Oh Crap! What should we do?"
- "Throw me in!"

He would rather die than go to Nineveh and have God show love to his enemies.

They throw him in... storm calms... they sail away... and Jonah sinks, ready to die.

When suddenly God sends a big fish to swallow Jonah...

- Doesn't seem like much of a rescue... the smell, the darkness, am I dead or alive? Am I going to be digested?
- He's in there for 3 days.
- Had some thinking time.
- In that dark, stinking belly of the fish he prays...

Jonah 2:1-2 *Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the fish. He said, "I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble, and he answered me. I called to you from the land of the dead, and LORD, you heard me!"*

God hadn't given up on Jonah or the Assyrians.

- He will always pursue the disobedient and the lost.

God has the fish spit Jonah out onto the shore... must have been extremely gross

And Jonah finally goes to Nineveh... was becoming the largest city in the world at the time.

And gives one of the worst sermons ever...

Jonah 3:4 *On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!"*

At least it was a short sermon.

He kind of left out the whole... God loves you and wants to forgive you.

- Why? B/c Jonah doesn't want them to repent and be forgiven. He wants them to burn.

Isn't that terrible... but if we're honest... We can be a lot like Jonah

- When someone's hurt us, when a group seems evil... it's easy to root for God's judgment instead of his mercy.
- We want the 'bad guys' to pay, not to be shown grace.
- We are often more eager to see God's justice against our enemies than his mercy

Despite Jonah's worst efforts... something amazing happens.

The entire city, around 120,000 people, from the king down to the lowest peasant... completely repent.

- The king himself steps off his throne, takes off his royal robes, and sits in the dust, wearing burlap, repenting publicly.
- He says, 'Maybe, just maybe, if we change, God will give us mercy.'

And God does.

- He sees their hearts, sees their change, and gives them mercy.
- The worst people you can imagine repent... and God forgives them.
- No one, nowhere, is too far gone for God's love.

You'd think Jonah would be thrilled!

- He might have just saved the ancient world from more brutality
- He should be dancing and celebrating!
- Instead...

Jonah 4:1-3 *This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the LORD about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."*

So dramatic!

He knew God's love wasn't fair. He knew God would forgive. That's why he ran.

- These people deserve justice, not mercy.
- God is too loving, too merciful, too forgiving... IT'S NOT FAIR!!

Our quest for justice can make us think we are holier than God.

But Jonah thinks to himself... maybe the Ninevites are just putting on a show... or maybe God will come to his senses.

Sets up camp on a hill overlooking the city so he can watch God destroy it when he finally figures out Jonah was right.

- It's hot in Iraq... so God makes a big leafy plant grow up and give him shade.

- The next day God has a worm eat it, and it withers

Jonah 4:8-9 *And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed. Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!"*

And you thought your kids were moody and dramatic.

Then the story ends abruptly with Jonah sulking and God asking him questions...

Jonah 4:10-11 *Then the LORD said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"*

God calls Jonah out, "You're upset about a plant... something you didn't plant or water. A comfort you thought you deserved.

- But I'm concerned about people.
- Which do you think is better?

Jonah's thrilled to get a little shade. He's outraged when God gives grace to his enemies.

Anyone relate? It's easy to receive mercy; much harder to celebrate when someone else gets it, especially the people you don't think deserve it.

God's love is often easier to receive than to give.

For Jonah, God's love should have had boundaries: for people who look, talk, think like him; not for his enemies.

He made God in his own image.

He didn't understand

- God's mercy doesn't depend on our goodness or background; it's scandalously, uncomfortably available to everyone. No exceptions.

Ok... let's leave poor Jonah alone to sulk and turn it on ourselves...

Who do you see as beyond God's love?

- Is there a group or a type of person you secretly, or not so secretly, believe doesn't deserve God's blessing or forgiveness?
- Maybe it's even someone who hurt you deeply.

I have to admit. There are people I struggle to love. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one.

I wish there were a loophole in this story, but there's not.

- Real faith is about learning to love others like God loves us.

But this kind of faith shown in love is risky...

- What about justice? Will they think they are off the hook?
- They might not learn their lesson. How will they ever change?
- We'll look push-overs

Here's the deal: Loving your enemies is real faith in action. Whether they change, learn, or even notice... that's God's business.

- Real faith loves, and then leaves the results to God.

YOU: So this week. We can take a small step to practice trusting God through loving our enemies.

Is there someone or even a group you avoid, judge, or struggle to love?

- Could be whole groups of people: rep's, dem's, black, white, brown, natural born, undocumented, rich corporate elitists, vegan environmentalists, suicide bombers, white supremacists?
- Or could be more personal- co-workers, bosses, neighbors, in-laws, your ex?

Pick someone specific...

First, Pray for them.

- Not that God will change them, but for their good.
- Their health, relationships, and even for them to be successful.
- It's hard to hate someone when you are asking God to help them.

Then if you can... Do something loving.

- Send a text, offer help, show interest in their life, speak a kind word.

Even if you aren't sure about faith, try these steps this week and see if it does something in your heart.

But maybe today, the person who needs God's unconditional love is you. There is no one too far gone.

- **John 3:16** *For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*

The whole world includes you.

And how did he do that? By dying and rising again... just as he said he would...

Matthew 12:40 *For as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.*

Just as God invited Nineveh to repent... to turn from their old way and trust his mercy... he invites you too.

- Repentance just means changing your mind about who runs your life: is it just you, or is it God and his bigger love?

There's no pressure, just an invitation.

- When you're ready, you can pray: "Jesus, I trust your love for me. I ask for your forgiveness and want to follow you; let your love shape my heart."

Jonah never answers God's final question.

- The story ends with God's love hanging in the air, waiting for Jonah's response.
- And maybe that's the point... because now it's our turn to answer.

WE: God's love is an overflowing ocean... limitless, life-giving, and available to everyone.

No one's past is too messy. No one's story too far gone.

When we say yes to him, he fills us so we can overflow into the lives of others... one person, one act, at a time.

Picture a life and a community where hatred dissolves into hope, enemies become friends, and wounded families start to heal.

- That's what makes faith real.

God's love isn't something to hoard. It's something to share.

- Even with those we'd rather not.
- even with the last people we'd expect.