

The Fifteenth Sunday after  
Pentecost  
Lectionary A, Proper 20, Jonah  
3:10-4:11  
Trinity Church, September 21,  
2014

I am sure we have all felt  
sorry for ourselves. “Why did this  
miserable thing happen to me?”  
“Feel my pain!” We then lick our  
wounds and hope that someone  
will come along to kiss our wound  
and make us well.

Jonah certainly fits this  
description. He was unhappy that  
the people of Nineveh repented of

their evil. They deserved to be punished but God granted them mercy. Jonah wanted great calamity to befall them. But God changed his mind about hurting them and was slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. In Jonah's huff he said that it would be better if he died rather than witness this pardon, and made a booth for himself outside the city so he could be in the shade.

To teach Jonah a lesson, God provided a bush to give Jonah the shade he desired. Jonah was happy about this, but the next day a worm attacked the bush and it died. Once

again, Jonah felt sorry for himself and said, “It is better for me to die than to live.” The story concludes with God saying to Jonah, “You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

This story is not to be taken literally. Rather, its purpose is to

proclaim God's universal compassion. Jonah had predicted the fall of Nineveh, so he was upset first of all that his prediction did not come true; and he was even more concerned with his own comfort rather than the well being of the city. God noted that the sin of Nineveh was born of ignorance. They didn't even know their right hand from their left. We see this same compassion expressed in the New Testament when at Jesus' crucifixion he prays for his persecutors. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Instead of

seeking revenge Jesus showed compassion. Instead of feeling sorry for himself he prayed for those whose hearts remained in ignorance.

Perhaps you are able to look at the bigger picture when feeling sorry for yourself. Instead of grumbling about burnt toast you remember those without bread and provide food for the hungry. In conflict, instead of being quick to bombard your opponent with bad language and mean tricks, you think first about conversation and perhaps mediation to bring about mutual understanding and a

reasonable solution. Even if you have a real reason to feel sorry for yourself because of serious illness or personal loss, some manage to lift up their heads in prayer asking for God's comfort and help.

Instead of whining, "Why me?" they say, "Why not me." Problems are thus recognized as being part of life; and in their personal compassion would not wish suffering on anyone else just to relieve their own distress.

Feeling sorry for ourselves is often just momentary. On those occasions when I realized I was nursing a scratch not a wound, I

would leave my pity feelings and make a hospital call. Each patient managed to cheer me up not even realizing what they had done.

When I turned my attention toward the welfare of someone else I got out of myself and was healed.

Eckhart Tolle, who has written so much about the importance of the “now” in our lives, wrote: “The ego says, ‘I shouldn’t have to suffer, and that thought makes you suffer so much more. It is a distortion of the truth, which is always paradoxical. The truth is that you need to say yes to suffering before you can transcend

it.” As we go through any grief process we have to eventually get to an acceptance of our situation in order to move forward in a positive manner.

Life isn't always fair. Some struggle more than others. But in God's time all receive the same reward. Jesus spoke of this in the parable of the laborers who worked just a few hours for the landowner but were paid as much as those who had worked a full day. Those who worked all day were envious that they weren't compensated more under the circumstances, but all were generously rewarded. All

received the same pay. And for the people of Nineveh, all were forgiven and restored. Both of these stories speak of the universal love and compassion of God.

A challenge for us is to live into our suffering as well as our joys. With that acceptance we can move forward to new opportunities without being held back in our grief. New moments deserve our full attention. The good news of our lives may even come through suffering. A momentary pity-party may be in order, but look beyond your suffering to new life.