

“Second Chances”

Sermon on Sunday, January 21, 2024

Dear church,

Let us talk about second chances this morning. It’s such a commonly used expression... people have messed up and receive a second chance to right themselves, “get back on their feet,” as we say. The term is often used around recovery facilities and among people in recovery. There are countless places in our country called “Second Chance Recovery Center.” One of them posts their mission as follows: “The mission of Second Chances Addiction Recovery Center is to provide hope, healing, and restoration to individuals and families struggling with addictions. We believe the treatment of the whole person is necessary for lasting recovery including physical, mental, spiritual, and relational wellbeing for our guests and their family members.”

It makes sense. Anyone who knows something about human life, except maybe for people who are high on self-righteousness, will give struggling folks another chance, right? We all deserve another chance. It sounds reasonable, noble, the right thing to do. But in the messy reality of life, it’s rarely easy. Why? First, if we are honest, the truth is... we often need more than one additional chance; learning from our mistakes is not a one-shot deal. Many times, we need third, fourth, fifth chances, sometimes tenth chances. Second, depending on how severe the mistakes were and frankly, how hurtful, how damaging, how trust-shattering, people may not give us a second chance. Third, if people take it for granted that they will always be given another chance, it may erode their motivation to take the issue seriously and erode other people’s trust in them. So, it's not as simple as it sounds.

Still, the Bible is full of people who received extra opportunities to right themselves. Moses, Jacob, King David, Peter, Paul, and many others. In fact, are there any people in the Bible who did not need second chances? I doubt it. Jesus and the Holy Spirit maybe. Faith, it seems, thrives among people who get the kindness of a second chance in life. Take Jonah, the prophet in today’s first reading.

“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.’”

Who was Jonah? He was an unwilling servant of God, sent on a mission that he didn’t like, running away from it, getting himself deeper and deeper in trouble. God wanted him to bring good news to the people in Nineveh, which was one of the biggest cities on earth back in the days. God wanted to bring the people in that city good news, such as: “You need to change in order to avoid a major disaster!” Jonah failed to see how this might qualify as good news. Many of us, when we hear those words, may not hear it either. It sounds more like, “Shape up or else.”

But the people of this 21st century will surely understand that warnings and scary predictions can be lifesaving. Even if we don't "get it" the first time - as in the dire warnings regarding the consequences of global warming. If we heeded the real warnings life grants us, they would be good news. Shockingly, ironically, against all expectations, in the Book of Jonah, the Ninevites understood Jona's message immediately. They put on sackcloth, a symbol of remorse and repentance. Just imagine, what would our world look like if we took the current warnings seriously, from Washington to Beijing, from Moscow to New Deli, from the state capital of Harrisburg to Montgomery, Alabama, to Sacramento? It could turn into good news. The world right now is one big Nineveh. And God is begging us to listen and heed the warning. For our own good. How many chances do we need?

A few years ago, the UK newspaper The Guardian published a series about people who received second chances in life. It was a series of hopes, and I'd like to summarize one of those stories. This one is about an Iraqi teenager who was hit by an explosion while playing with friends. It was August 3, 2006. He was hit from a short distance, thrown up in the air, and everybody believed that he would die on the spot. He had lost parts of his skull, his nose, his cheeks. Nobody believed he could survive his injuries; that included his family. But he was lucky. He was airlifted to Mosul by an American helicopter. The resources there were limited, and his recovery plateaued. One day he half-listened to a TV ad from "Doctors without Borders" for victims of the war to get help, to get in touch. As a result, he spent three years in their care, rehabbing in Amman, Jordan. Today, he lives in our country. He shared this as part of the article:

"I live in Austin now. I've been here almost seven years, and soon I'll have completed my degree at the University of Texas. I'm a refugee, a product of war, but in many ways I feel lucky. Not only am I still here, but I've started a new life doing things I could never have imagined. I'm hopeful about the future. If what I've been through has taught me anything, it is that you should take every opportunity that comes."

Are there perhaps some people here this morning who remember second chances given to them or their loved ones? Oh, that's a silly question! I'm sure there are, I know there are, and more than just a few. I imagine the God who sent Jonah to Nineveh saying to all those people who get second chances today, "Good for you! Take advantage of it! Don't feel guilty or ashamed when you fail... Know that I have your back. Life can be hard. But you can thrive if you believe in me and believe in yourself and take advantage of every opportunity given to you. Go in peace and learn from your mistakes."

Amen.