

The Tale of Three Hearts

BROKEN: Good News for Tough Times

Romans 9:1-5, Year A

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-tale-of-three-hearts/

As mentioned this morning, today is our annual Back to School Sunday, and we have delicious cookies for you after the service to celebrate! But some of you aren't fooled. A cookie won't make you forget that Back to School also means End of Summer. Parents are cheering. Students are crying. Teachers and staff are doing a little of both. The move from the freedom of summer to the hectic routine of another school year can feel like a dramatic plunge from the heights of joy.

In 2004, Debbie Downer debuted on the TV show Saturday Night Live. Debbie Downer is a fictional character created and portrayed by Rachel Dratch. Debbie is, indeed, a downer. Her comments kill any joy in the room. In one episode, Debbie and some friends are on vacation at Disney World. At lunch, her friend, played by Jimmy Fallon, tells the waitress he'd love steak and eggs, a favorite meal. And then Debbie Downer, in her monotone voice, responds, "Ever since they found mad cow disease in the US, I'm not taking any chances. "... "It can live in your body for years before it ravages your brain." Conversations with Debbie are yet another example of a dramatic plunge from the heights of joy. Maybe you know a Debbie Downer or two.

Last week, I preached on the end of Romans 8, this soaring culmination where Paul declares his absolute conviction "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38-39).

And then you flip the page to Chapter 9, our text today, and read these words from Paul, "I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." (Romans 9:1-2)

It is difficult to imagine a more dramatic plunge from the heights of joy found at the end of chapter 8 to the depths of agony expressed at the beginning of chapter 9. This is why some scholars think chapters 9-11 might have been misplaced or should have been left out. But I don't think so. I can tell you from experience that it is possible to be caught up in the exhilaration of life's joys and hopes, remember someone you love who is not experiencing it with you, and your heart plunges to sorrow.

This is Paul's experience. He's most likely speaking these words to his friend, Tertius (TUR-shus), who physically wrote the letter, according to Romans 16:22. You can almost imagine Paul pacing the room, getting caught up in this declaration of God's extraordinary love for us in Christ, and then Tertius interrupts and says, "But, Paul, what about the Jews?" And then, Paul, who had been so focused on the Gentiles, the newest additions to the family of God, Paul remembers his faith family who are stumbling over Jesus as the promised Messiah. And his heart is broken.

Perhaps some of you can relate to Paul's confession. You've come this morning broken-hearted, burdened by sorrow. Life is full of heartbreak, big and small. There is no shortage of brokenness that grieves our hearts. When people ask, "How are you?" we usually reply with our customary "Good" or

“Fine.” But perhaps, if we were honest, we’d respond with a verse rarely memorized. “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.” (Romans 9:2) I’ve never seen that cross-stitched on a pillow. If I saw that on a couch in someone’s living room, I might be tempted to exit before the tea was served or spilled.

Out of great love, Paul desperately wanted his flesh-and-blood relatives to know and experience the same freedom in Christ he has experienced. Paul remembers those early days of striving before he encountered the living Christ on the road to Damascus. Christ ambushed him, changed his life forever, and set him free through faith. In response to Christ’s love and grace, Paul devoted his life fully to the way of Jesus, traveling all over and proclaiming the good news of God’s love and grace on full display in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. This love and mercy empowered Paul’s ministry amid beatings, imprisonment, and church conflict. It doesn’t just sadden him that his family doesn’t know this grace. It causes him unrelenting agony. He wants them to receive the gift of grace through Christ so badly that he pronounces his willingness to be “accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own brothers and sisters, my own flesh and blood.” (Romans 9:3) Much like when we say we’d give our right arm for someone we love, I imagine Paul knows this will not be required. He has told us repeatedly throughout this letter and others that Christ and the cross are enough. Paul’s sacrifice is unnecessary, but his passionate offer reveals his heart for his fellow Israelites.

Some of you share Paul’s broken heart for those you love who have yet to experience the grace, love, and mercy Jesus brings to our lives. Could our hearts break even in compassion for those we don’t know or those who have been our enemies who have yet to know God’s mercies?

My family has gone to Branson for an annual end-of-summer trip for many years. One of the things we usually do while there is seeing the newest show at the Sight & Sound Theater. Sight & Sound is an entertainment company that brings Bible stories to life on stage through music and drama. We’ve seen Noah, Moses, Samson, Jesus, and, this year, Esther. We also saw Jonah a few years ago.

If you don’t know the short story of Jonah from the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, Jonah is a prophet who is called to deliver a warning of judgment and an offer of mercy to a rebellious nation, Nineveh. Nineveh is the worst, most murderous, unbelieving city and empire in the ancient world. They built their empire by sending out large armies to conquer cities and did unspeakable, violent, and horrifying things to the people they conquered. They did this to many Israelite cities and took those who survived into captivity. Knowing this, we can understand why Jonah doesn’t want to go to Nineveh even if God told him to go. So, instead of bringing them an opportunity for mercy, Jonah goes on the run. After a series of wild adventures involving a seaport called Joppa, a huge boat, and a terrible storm, Jonah finds himself in the belly of a giant fish. But this isn’t the end. In the belly, God teaches Jonah how to receive grace and extend mercy, even to his archenemy: Nineveh.

The fish spews Jonah out onto dry land, and Jonah goes to Nineveh to preach God’s love and forgiveness and call them to repentance. But he preached much like a teen who finally does the chore he was told to do but doesn’t want to do. He physically obeys, but his heart doesn’t. Jonah’s got no love in the game and still hopes and believes Nineveh won’t repent and will be destroyed. But much to Jonah’s surprise and displeasure, they repent and cry out for God’s mercy. Not just every person, but even the animals, which might be one of my favorite images in scripture where it says that even the animals wore sackcloth and ashes in repentance.

At the end of this short story, Jonah is only alive because of God's mercy. And at the end of this short story, the thing Jonah is most angry about is God's mercy. Jonah tells God, "This is why I didn't want to come to Nineveh, because I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment." (Jonah 4:2b)

Jonah says I knew you would forgive them because that's who you are, God. And I don't want you to forgive them. Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites is understandable, and it would have touched a nerve with Israelite listeners when they heard this story. From the beginning, God's purpose is to bring his blessing and salvation to all the nations through Israel. Which puts Israel in an awkward situation when the nation God wants to bless and offer mercy to a nation like Nineveh. They're struggling with the fact that God loves your enemy as much as God loves you and wants your enemy to find the same mercy you've discovered. The story of Jonah is more about God's heart and the heart of God's people than it is about Nineveh. It is about this tendency in the hearts and minds of God's people to see themselves as a unique group who have received God's mercy and then form an arrogant hostility towards the nonchosen ones.

Jonah clearly thinks the Ninevites are the worst, most wretched sinners on the planet. But in the story of Jonah, who's the most hard-hearted person? It's Jonah. And throughout the story, God is trying to get him to see, "Yeah, you're a part of the covenant people, and that's cool, Jonah, but that doesn't make you superior. You're just as broken and lost and misguided as they are. Don't you see? And as one who has received my generous mercy, who are you to be angry about my concern and love for Nineveh's people and animals?"

Poet Thomas Carlisle wrote a powerful book of poetryⁱ inspired by the book of Jonah, titled "You! Jonah!" Here is one of his poems, titled "Tantrum."

The generosity of God
Displeased Jonah exceedingly
And he slashed with angry prayer
At the graciousness of the Almighty.
"I told You so," he screamed.
"I knew what You would do,
You dirty Forgiver.
You bless Your enemies
and show kindness to those
who spitefully use You."

I imagine some of us have felt this way about God at times. Too generous, too liberal in mercy, God's embrace too wide, a dirty Forgiver. The most common description in Scripture of God is that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and kindness. We sing with heartfelt gratitude that God has extended this to us. Yet, it still surprises us when God extends it to others.

We often read Romans 9 and believe this text is about who is excluded. But the text is actually about God and who God includes.

God has been at work from the beginning to bless all nations. In the beginning, God chose a people and built a nation to help God restore the world, a kingdom of priests who would show the world what God is like. But God's people, Jew and Gentile alike, often forget the scandalous nature of the God we claim to serve and worship, and we begin to serve ourselves. Throughout this story, God corrects, sometimes

gently and sometimes with great discipline. God prunes us when necessary and invites us to new heights of fruitfulness. And along the way, God chose to graft into God's family tree the Gentiles, or the wild olive branches as Paul calls them in Chapter 11 of Romans.

The Gentiles had been shockingly included, but Paul cautions them not to let their hearts become arrogant about this inclusion. The Israelites are still covenant people, the root of the tree. They are Paul's family. "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." (Romans 9:4-5)

Over the following three chapters, Paul talks about the Jews and what is ahead for them, and Paul returns to the heights of joy once again. How did he get there after such agony? Because as he dictates this letter and gets caught up in who God was, is, and will always be, Paul remembers it has always been about God and God's mercies. God doesn't go back on God's promises, and God has made promises to God's people. God did not plant a new tree and abandon the old one. God extended the family tree by grafting the wild olive branches into the existing tree so that they will grow together into one tree. Whether they like it or not, the tree will forever have characteristics of both as they grow together as one. This is God's plan.

Is the joining of the two messy? Yes. Is it hard? Absolutely. That is why so many of Paul's writings aim for unity. Where the past had seen the people of God steadily more entrenched against their neighbors, the early Christian movement would make a name for itself by including these different peoples in common fellowship. In his soon-to-be-released book *Centering Jesus*, author Derek Vreeland writes, "God's Kingdom depends on the church being a socially diverse and multiethnic family where people whom the world tries to divide are united around the throne of the Lamb."

If unity is God's plan, then division must be one of evil's greatest objectives. And for Paul in Romans, the answer to division can be summarized in one word: death. His answer is not for Jews to fight for their rights or boast of their Jewish heritage or for the Gentiles to brag of their freedom from the law, but for both to follow the Savior in his humiliation and death. Paul relentlessly commands compromise and self-denial, death of self for the sake of communal peace.

This text is the tale of three hearts. The first is Paul's heart, a heart broken for those who have not grasped the grace of Jesus Christ, a heart beating for those outside the faith family whom God profoundly loves, too.

The second is God's heart. It belongs to a Creator and Redeemer who is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and kindness. God's heart is the heart of a dirty Forgiver.

And the third is our hearts. I want to speak to the Christ-followers first. If you're here and don't believe in Jesus, first of all, we're glad you're here or listening online. You are welcome. Keep listening, but this next bit is for the church.

Followers of Christ, we can sometimes be Debbie Downers. We can kill the joy of God doing a new work of mercy in the world because we either forget the story is about God's generous mercy and not us, or we're mad about God's generous mercy to certain others. And yet, like Jonah and Paul, we are only at the table because of God's generous mercy towards us.

Perhaps we need to beg God to break our hearts for others, not just those we love but for our enemies who are loved by God, too. Perhaps God invites us into relationships with people different from us, or even our enemies, so God might grow us, teaching us what it means to receive grace and extend mercy, a lesson learned not in the belly of a giant fish but in the gut of a diverse church family. Then, God spits us out into the world, covered in mercy, so we can speak of God's mercies to those who also need and deserve to hear it.

And for those here who have not yet decided about Jesus, God is gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love and kindness for YOU. There is nothing for you to do other than receive the promise that all has been done for you through Christ's death and resurrection. There are no hoops to jump through, no behaviors to get right before you say yes to Jesus. Obedience to God brings blessing, but it does not earn love. Love is freely given and yours to receive, my friends.

I want to end with the last poem in Carlisle's poetry collection about Jonah. This poem is titled "Coming Around."

"And Jonah stalked
To his shaded seat
And waited for God
To come around
To his way of thinking.

And God is still waiting
For a host of Jonahs
In their comfortable houses
To come around
To His way of loving."

May we come around to God's way of loving.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ Thomas John Carlisle, "You! Jonah!" Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (May 13, 2022)