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The story of Jonah is one of my favorite stories from the Hebrew Scriptures—one that I am reminded of each time I see Jonah sitting on my desk in my office. I obtained this small figure when Staci and I went to see the production of Jonah in Branson several years ago, which brought the story alive as the actors portrayed his life on stage.

The story of Jonah is a small book in the Hebrew Bible—only four chapters, but it’s more than a big fish story, for it contains a BIG idea. How many of you have heard the story of Jonah? It’s a story so familiar that we might miss the big picture about what God was doing, but let’s pause this morning and review the highlights of his journey—and in telling the story I will need your help.

I imagine Jonah was a regular guy going about his life, trying to do the best he could, like most of us—but in the back of his mind, he feared the Assyrians, the nearby nation filled with what he considered evil and violent people. They were a large empire to the east of Jonah’s community, with large cities and lots of people. Jonah was a small-

town kind of guy, who wanted nothing more than to raise his family in a safe place. He may have tried not to worry about the Assyrians, but he knew the consequences if the Assyrians decided to invade their land. Destruction.

Maybe while pondering the evils of the Assyrians and asking God, “Why don’t you do something about those evil people?” he heard God whisper in his ear, “Why don’t you, Jonah, do something about them?”

“Me? What could I do?” Jonah may have replied.

“Go and speak with them. Tell them to turn around their lives and change.”

“Something smells a bit fishy to me, God. They won’t change—they’re evil!”

Jonah reluctantly headed to the boat docks at Joppa, but instead of taking a ship to Nineveh in Assyria, he hopped on a ship for Tarshish, which was headed where? (*Here’s where I need your help.*)

In the opposite direction!

While on board the ship, a violent storm arose and the sailors wondered why it happened. When

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they discovered that Jonah was running away from God, they decided he was to blame for the storm, so Jonah suggested what? **They throw him overboard to calm the sea.** Today we might argue with that logic, for we know that God does not create storms if someone misbehaves, but the narrator tells us the sea calmed as soon as the sailors threw Jonah into the water.

I imagine you know what happened next, right?... **(Jonah is swallowed by a big fish and after three days in spit onto the ground after he prays to God.)**

I heard of a minister who told the story of Jonah during a children's time one Sunday morning.

The minister began by explaining how Jonah was running away from God and didn't want to do what God asked him to do. The children heard how a great fish swallowed Jonah, how Jonah prayed inside the great fish, and how the fish spit him up on dry land.

The pastor then invited the children to offer their input by asking, "What does the fish

vomiting Jonah out on dry land indicate to us today?" One child spoke up loud and clear: "It proves that even a fish can't stomach a bad preacher!"¹

Next comes the best part of the story: Jonah spoke to the people of Nineveh—and how did they respond? **They listened!** They put on sack cloth and spread ashes all over themselves to show their sorrow, and God's mind changed and God canceled the plan to destroy them.

That could have been the end to a happy story, right? But the story continues for another chapter, for Jonah was not happy with the results. He didn't buy into God's grace and forgiveness and the people's changed lives.

I imagine Jonah might have complained: "Look God, I didn't come all the way out here just to let them off the hook. I expected some fire and brimstone, some show of power from you. All they did was wear some old feed bags, get dirty with ashes, say *I'm sorry*, and you accept that? How do we know they are sincere? Maybe they will go back

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to their old ways when we aren't looking. What about the evil of their past? They made mistakes and they should be punished!"

How many times do we find ourselves siding with Jonah's view?

When a marriage goes awry and a couple bitterly fights with one another to get even for the failed marriage, everyone suffers, especially any children who watch the scenario played out between their parents.

When a doctor makes a wrong diagnosis, one might spend a lot of negative energy trying to sue the doctor even after hearing an apology.

Offering forgiveness is not an easy thing to do, is it? It's hard work to let go of our pain and accept that someone can apologize and change, but forgiveness is more than something you offer another person.

1. One reason to offer the gift of forgiveness to someone is because it's also a gift to yourself, as writer Maya Angelou once said, "It's one of the

greatest gifts you can give yourself, to forgive. Forgive everybody."²

2. A second reason to offer forgiveness is that you offer an act of strength, not weakness. Gandhi highlighted this point when he said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."

3. Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested a third reason we should offer forgiveness: "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies." In other words, we love ourselves when we can offer forgiveness.

4. Fourth, you can find peace when you offer forgiveness, as Buddhist teacher Ajahn Chah explained, "If you let go a little you will have a little peace; if you let go a lot you will have a lot of peace; if you let go completely you will have complete peace."

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5. And fifthly, when you forgive, you may someday discover your own need for forgiveness, as writer Peace Pilgrim stated, “In this world you are given as you give. And you are forgiven as you forgive. While you go your way through each lovely day, you create your future as you live.”

None of us are perfect, and at one point or another we will do something wrong. We will make mistakes. We may even feel that we are unforgiveable, but God never gives up on you. God always offers another chance, again and again.

On this All Saints’ Day, we remember those people who have gone before us. Although they have done some wonderful things for our congregation, I imagine some of you could share stories about their mistakes, their challenging personalities, their sins. Being a saint does not mean one is perfect and without error, but that one tried to follow God’s ways while stumbling along

the way. Like Jonah, the saints we recall today may have tried to run away from what God asked them to do. Like Jonah, they may not have always understood what God was doing, and they may have felt something smelled a bit fishy from time to time. And like Jonah, they may have discovered that forgiveness was difficult to offer.

Their lives offer us hope, for they remind us that we too are called to be saints, even when filled with our mistakes and shortcomings. God understands our inability to totally grasp what God is doing, and even when we find it difficult to trust that God offers forgiveness to those around us and even to us, God offers another chance each and every day. As we give thanks for the saints who have gone before us, let us also give thanks to God for offering us forgiveness in those moments in life when something smells a bit fishy.

¹ Adapted from www.nswchurches.org/Resources/Laughs/L0011.pdf

² Quotations from “Forgiveness: 5 Reasons Why You Should Let Go of Resentments,” Luminita D. Saviuc, Dec. 9, 2014,

www.purposefairy.com/5311/forgiveness-5-reasons-why-you-should-let-go-of-resentments/