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About This Study

We hope that you'll dive in, grow in the Lord, and share with others what beauty God reveals to you through it. If you are doing this study independently, know that we at HOM are here for you & that you also have a LARGE community of women through our website and social media that are participating too! You are truly never alone!

If you are completing this study in a group setting - we are excited that you have found a local community to grow with, on top of our online sisterhood. Please use this study journal for your reference, resource, and more during your meetings and the personal time leading up to it.

Looking for a group? Please visit <u>www.heartofmarywf.com/groups</u> to find a meet up near you.

Are you already in one but not listed on our website? Looking to start one? Please contact us for more information about our "HOM Ambassador" program. We have team members available specifically to help you grow a local group and lead other women through community, prayer, and devotion. Their support is available at all times. We also want to help you grow! We will advertise your group on our website & social media! And we have free resources for you as well. Please email us at <u>heartofmarywf@aol.com</u>

Note: All written content has been reviewed by a Catholic spiritual director to cross check that all statements are align with the teachings and tenants of the Roman Catholic Church.

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Today's Scripture n/a

December 8, 2015 - the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception - marked the start of an Extraordinary Year of Mercy, called by Pope Francis that we might "gaze even more attentively on mercy so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives."

Here at the Heart of Mary, we found it especially fitting, then, that we had already chosen to study the book of Jonah. While Jonah runs, God pursues. And in the wake of this "reluctant prophet" we see again and again, God's mercy.

God's mercy to the Ninevites. God's mercy to Jonah. God's mercy to the sailors.

And God's mercy toward us.

Mercy is, according to Bishop Robert Barron, "what love looks like when it turns toward the sinner...To speak of mercy is to be intensely aware of sin and its peculiar form of destructiveness."

Jonah then, is certainly a story of mercy. It's God's mercy to the sinner, God's mercy to us, and also our mercy towards others. Let's take the next two weeks to look at Jonah and contemplate the mastery of mercy. For, as Pope Francis reminds us in Misericordiae Vultus,

"It is a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. Our salvation depends on it. Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness."

"While we may run, God pursues."

Together, let's look at Jonah. Let's commit to seeking out that little bit of silence "in order to meditate on the Word that comes to us." So that together, over the course of the next two weeks, it "will be possible to contemplate God's mercy and adopt it as our lifestyle." That, through Jonah we might learn to practice mercy and "come to the aid of our neighbor in his spiritual and bodily necessities." (CCC 2447)

- Christine

Reflection:



Today's Scripture

Jonah 1:1-2

I'm a terrible judge of character. Awful. I spend a lot of time in my own head and when I finally remember to look out, I am often catching a glimpse of the thing that jolted me into the real world to begin with. It's often something small: a sideways glance at me; a whispered word across the room in which the whisperer [accidentally] catches my eye and I assume the whispers are about me; a harsh word that draws blood.

I carry the wound with me. I nurse it and coddle it and make sure it grows.

I can make a pretense of writing about how this isn't the right thing to do - but we already know that.

And it's not enough.

Time again the wickedness of a people - that is, my wickedness when I nurse and coddle a hurt into resentment - "rises up" before God. And yet, He doesn't nurse his wounds into resentment. He doesn't coddle a hurt into wrath.

Rather, the God of the universe turns to us in love for "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And that is perfect mercy.

"Jonah turned and ran, but what will we do?"

We see it here in Nineveh. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and a foe to the Israelites. Their wickedness is so much that it has risen before God. But he turns toward the city in love. He turns toward the wickedness and, reaching out across the sin to bridge the divide, sends his servant Jonah to cry against it that its inhabitants might repent.

Well. He tries to send Jonah. He wants Jonah to go.

But Jonah will have none of it. He immediately gets onto the first ship he can find and sails...away. In the opposite direction and to nowhere in par-

ticular. Just away.. Not a few theologians believe that the reason Jonah left was not that he feared his life in the face of his foe, but that he feared the city would actually repent and make Israel look bad.

Jonah turned and ran, but what will we do? What should our response be in the face of those whose wickedness rises up to God? Are we "merciful like the Father" and reach across to our brothers and sisters in love? Or are we Jonah and afraid of that mercy? Are we afraid of God's love? Of its effects?

God loves his creation! He loves man! He loves you.

- Christine

Study Questions:

Q: How might we be the face of mercy to those around us? Today, can we find an opportunity no matter how small - to turn to our fellow man in love and practice a spiritual or corporeal work of mercy (CCC 2447) without thought of what that might mean to us?

Day 3 // Are You Sleeping?

Today's Scripture

Jonah 1:4-6

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god; and they threw the wares that were in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down in the inner part of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not perish."

Last we left Jonah he was boarding the first boat that came his way and sailed in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go. Today, we join him on that boat. It's not a good place to be, this boat, even if you aren't one prone to sea-sickness. Jonah's troubles have followed him, they rage against him, and now they rage around the other members of the ship, too.

But Jonah, he handles it really well! He decides he's going to sleep. You know if you ignore something, it's going to work out in the end. Rock. Solid. Plan, Jonah.

See, I can say this, because I've been there. That time I go to open my mouth about someone I know. I feel the little nudge inside to close my mouth before its too late, but I don't. I plunge forward and my tongue

"With God's mercy comes an excruciating and painful awareness of our sin." flaps and I've said something I shouldn't. Usually about another person. It could be calumny. Or gossip. But whatever the specificities isn't important in this instance because I knew I shouldn't have said anything. Jonah? He was supposed to say something. And my response to sin? It's usually like Jonah's.

I go to sleep. I pretend it didn't happen. I pretend I didn't know it was gossip (or it's cousin, calumny), and I just continue on my merry way. I ignore the twinge of guilt and pretend there is nothing wrong. Pretending I shouldn't be on my knees, head bowed, and in the confessional.

And when that happens, when I ignore the effect of that sin on my own life I am also ignoring the wedge I've put in someone else's life. Because sin is communal.

The storm that is tossing this ship isn't going to harm Jonah only. His sin has put others in danger, too. There is are no victimless sins. Neither are there any sins in which, "I am only hurting myself." Worse, it's impossible to know the extent to which our sin will reach our neighbor. Maybe our sin will be just an annoyance to those around us, a scratch that needs to be itched. But it may be, as in the case of Jonah, the cause of such hardship that we are endangering the lives of those around us.

The Book of Jonah is now a book of irony: the messenger of God to the wicked has now become the wicked. And the men assumed to be wicked, now become the messenger of God to Jonah. So that while Jonah refuses to speak to the Ninevites, the pagan does not refuse to speak to Jonah.

"What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we do not perish." (Jonah 1:6) With God's mercy comes an excruciating and painful awareness of our sin. Often, the tempests roll in. What is our response? -Christine

Study Questions:

Q: Is there anything that you are sleeping through, too afraid to face waves right now? Is God attempting to wake you up, perhaps even by someone who is not aware he is a messenger of God? What will be your response?

Day 4 // If He is your God, What are you doing?

Today's Scripture

Jonah 1:7-10

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And from where do you come? What is your country? And of what people are you?" And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." Then the men were exceedingly afraid, and said to him, "What is this that you have done! For the men knew that he was fleeing from the present of the Lord, because he had told them.

I walked into the kitchen to start preparing dinner. One of my children was already there, making a treat for later in the evening. Dinner required the use of a can opener, and our can opener is located in a large drawer. The drawer is large enough, but the utensils that crowd it are many. The can opener, the rolling pin, the measuring spoons, the measuring cups. You get the picture.

So there I was, walking up to the drawer to pull out the can opener when I notice that the two children whispering and crowding and the drawer suddenly part like the red sea, one on either side of me. Clearly, something was wrong. And suddenly, the quiet became very loud!

"What," I asked, "on earth are you doing?"

Turns out, the drawer was stuck closed. Something jammed inside, preventing the drawer from opening. The kids thought it was their fault and so were trying to hide it from me, afraid of the lecture about how they really need to be a little more careful when operating in the kitchen. And it strikes me that this is Jonah. Jonah shut the kitchen drawer and now it can't be opened. So he's gone off and tried to hide it. But in this passage, the truth is coming out. Not only is the storm that is ravaging the boat, but it turns out the crew is at its wits end. They have tried everything they can think of: they have prayed to their gods, they have thrown their material goods overboard. Now, they have cast lots and its Jonah who has come up guilty. Now, groggy from sleep they question him. "What," they demand, "is this that you have done!"

It is right for our fellow man to ask what on earth we think we are doing! On the one hand we say we fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." And on the other, we jump into the sea to hide from him.

On the one hand we say we love the Lord our God with all our heart, and then we refuse to extend our hand in charity and give to the poor or console our neighbor. On the one hand we say we love the Lord our God with all our soul, and then we refuse to extend our hand in mercy to visit the sick and imprisoned or to console our neighbor. On the one hand we say we love the Lord our God with all our mind, and then we refuse to extend our hand in justice to shelter the homeless or to advise our neighbor. "It is not enough to wake from the drunken stupor of sin. We must seek forgiveness. We must turn back to God."

It's not enough to wake from the drunken stupor of sin. We must seek forgiveness. We must turn back to God. And God, in his everlasting

mercy, reaches down to us - just as he reached down to Jonah - and prods us to turn around; moving us toward repentance. And Yes, God pursues man that we might turn back to him. - Christine

Study Questions:

Q: Thinking again to Pope Francis hope that we might be merciful as the Father is merciful, is there a place in our life where we say we believe God but aren't living it? Is there a group of people that we associate with who have legitimate recourse to ask us, "if you believe in God, why are you doing this?" And if so, how might we reach back out to them? Or would we prefer to be Jonah? Hiding from the God of the sea, in the sea?

Day 5 // You Can't Take Your Sin Back to the Shore

Today's Scripture

onal

Jonah 1:11-15

Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. He said to them, "Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will

"If I do manage to think of any spiritual works of mercy, I think of forgiveness and bearing wrongs patiently. Like the crew of this ship." quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. Therefore they cried to the Lord, "We beg you, O Lord, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you." So they took up Jonah and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging.

When I think of mercy - me to my neighbor, me to my friends - I think of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead." Of coursing, giving alms to the poor, too (CCC 2447). That is, the first thing that comes to mind are the corporal works of mercy.

If I do manage to think of any spiritual works of mercy, I think of forgiveness and bearing wrongs patiently. Like the crew of this ship.

Jonah's sin caused a huge storm! And the ship's crew has suffered be-

cause of it. They were forced to throw their material possessions overboard and, when that didn't work, they must have thought they were going to die! They had every right to be angry with Jonah. Indeed, I'd be tempted to throw him overboard, even before he volunteered.

But look at what the crew does. When Jonah tells them they need to throw him into the sea, they refuse. Rather, they attempt to row him back to shore. They want to get him back to dry land. Except, it's not possible. The waves rise up again, even stronger, and the men are forced to abandon their mission.

Not all wrongs are meant to be born patiently.

And just because we forgive the wrongs done against us, doesn't mean there aren't consequences.

This shouldn't come as any surprise to us. Are we the same Catholics who go into the confessional with our sins piled high, and come out, forgiven but holding penance instead. Why is it any difference when dealing with our fellow man?

Venerable Bishop Sheen knew this when he said, "If mercy meant the forgiveness of all faults without retribution and without justice, it would end in a multiplication of wrongs. Mercy is for those who will not abuse it, and no man will abuse it who already started to make the wrong right, as justice demands. What some today call mercy is not mercy at all, but a feather-bed for those who fall from justice; and thus they multiply guilt and evil by supplying such mattresses. To become the object of mercy is not the same as to got scotfree, for as the word of God says: "Whom the Lord loveth, he chastiseth." [From Way to Happiness by Fulton J. Sheen (Garden City Books, 1949)].

- Christine

Study Questions:

Q: Why do you think the men were so willing to risk their lives for a man who brought such trouble with him? Would you have done the same? Sheen says that mercy without justice is sentimentality and that justice without mercy is severity. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?



Today's Scripture Jonah 1:16

This is such a quiet verse; so small and just before the really big story line begins.

It reminds me of Paul at Areopagus in Acts chapter 17, one of my favorite passages in the Bible. Or maybe, Paul's story is reminiscent of Jonah.

If you'll remember, Paul came to Athens and was then brought into the Areopagus and was asked to talk about "this new teaching." Paul begins, "I perceive that you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship..." and he then goes onto proclaim to them the unknown God. Similarly, Jonah is brought up to the deck and then interrogated. Who are you? What do you believe?

But notice the mercy in both Paul and Jonah's response. Neither one of them condemn the men for what they are worshipping. Neither one of them tell them they are wasting their time because those gods are dead.

Rather, Paul says "I perceive that in every way you are religious..." and then he goes on from there to proclaim the Unknown God. And Jonah states simply, "I worship the God of heaven and earth." And boom he goes overboard.

We come in contact with all sorts of people during our day: coworkers, our children's friends' parents, neighbors. Many of them are panicked throwing things overboard trying to simplify their lives and getting rid of whatever they don't need to calm the raging sea.

Others are reading all the books they can find - wandering around the modern day Areopagus, fascinated by all the teachings that drift through their lives; trying to be enlightened men of the times and yet stumbling in the dar.

Still others might be drifting from church to church, belief to belief: eastern mysticism, Protestantism, the Church of Christ without Christ. They are religious, but don't know who the unknown God is.

What would being "merciful like the Father" mean in these cases?

We often read about "heart strings" when we pray to God, where it feels like our heart is being physically tugged up to heaven to meet him there. But what if we could actually take the love of the Father and reach out to others?

What if we could practice using those "heart strings" to reach out to our neighbors? It might be simply scooting over on the bleacher at our kids sporting event to make room for the lonely hearted. It might be as simple as picking up someone else's child from school for them. Or, it might prove more difficult, listening to someone when they spoke to you.

What if we could practice loving our neighbor like Jesus loves us? Not worrying about "converting" them, or "showing them God's love" so much as just plain loving them, without regard for the end result? Indeed we "What if we could practice loving our neighbor like Jesus loves us?"

might be like Jonah, supplying a need and then jumping ship, so to speak, so that we never see that at another time people make sacrifices and vows to God.

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, mercy is the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion that drives us to do what we can to help him (ST. II-II.30.2). - Christine

Study Questions:

Q: What if we could practice loving our neighbor like Jesus loves us? Can you do that this week? Let's ask God to teach our hearts to truly love our neighbor so that we might show them mercy.



Today's Scripture

Jonah

I think this verse pretty much sums up the entire story of Jonah - or at least the part of the story that everyone knows. I almost skipped over it. Of course Jonah got swallowed by the big fish.

But then I paused.

Did you ever have "one of those days?" You wake up in some kind of mysterious mood. You don't mean to, but you bark at the kids to brush their teeth and start snapping at them that they haven't even made their bed yet. Never mind that they are still in the process of brushing their teeth.

When I have one of those days, it often takes me quite some time before I realize what I was doing. When (hopefully not if!) I see it, I put myself in a time out. I remove myself to a bedroom or to another corner of the house so that I can make some kind of assessment and repair the situation.

For this, it's usually something simple like drinking water, making sure I actually drank my cup of coffee, or maybe making an important phone call that is weighing on my mind. Often times, I just need to make sure I get more sleep later that night.

But sometimes, I'm irritable for other reasons. Maybe I've been too tired and have let my morning prayer time go by the wayside. Or maybe it's been too long since I've visited the confessional.

Stop. Take a breath. And begin again.

In either case, I've brought the storm with me. And to calm the waves, I need to jump into the water. I need to pray and make time for the confessional. And in both instances, I find that once I stop and take a step in the other direction, it feels like a load has come off my shoulders. I need only to crack the door for grace so that it can work in my life.

And so it is with Jonah. He's run away from God and, thus, from life. But there's something about proclaiming "I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." It's like opening the door to grace again, cooperating with it.

God rescues Jonah from the sea. He, as Chesterton's Father Brown puts it, "caught him, with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread."

- Christine

Study Questions:

Q: Is there a place in your life right now where you have closed the door to grace? Why have you closed the door? Is it just time, or are you hiding? God's mercy is waiting. Will you open the door to let his grace in? Will you let him bring you back with a twitch upon the thread?



Today's Scripture

Jonah 2:1-9

Today we join Jonah in the belly of the fish.

He's already praying in verse 1. In his darkest moment, when all looks lost, Jonah doesn't fail to look to God and to count on Divine Mercy.

"Indeed! I cling to vanities. I think on them and pursue them with ardor, and often times that means I turn my back - even if accidentally - on my true Love." I've had my share of "dark nights." Or at least shadowy ones. Moments of loneliness, moments where I feel lost, moments of complete and utter failure. It feels natural enough to me to call out to God in these times. My heart draws near because that's where I find my refuge.

But often times, I'm not like that. It's not nearly so dramatic. Or good.

Generally, my life is more ordinary than dramatic. It's so ordinary, that I often miss the little gods I set up for myself throughout the day. There is the cell phone, of course. Everybody talks about that. But also there is the book I am reading, or the house I want to clean, or even my family. Truthfully, I elevate any number of things above their rightful place.

I have a million little vanities I cling to, as verse 8 mentions, and I forsake my true loyalty.

The Douay Rheims version of the Bible puts it little more clearly, "I for-

sook my own mercy."

Indeed! I cling to vanities. I think on them and pursue them with ardor, and often times that means I turn my back - even if accidentally - on my true Love. To paraphrase - and personalize - St. Jerome, I cling to my vanity as if I cherish it, thinking I have found some kind of treasure. And when I do that, I forsake mercy.

Not that mercy isn't available to me. But it is I who turn my back on Mercy. Indeed, mercy is God's love. It doesn't - it can't - turn its back on us, says St. Jerome, nor does it curse us. Mercy is patient. It "waits for us to return." Thank God for his mercy!

St. Jerome makes note that Jonah is not writing this with an air of condemnation. Are you tempted to notice all of the vanities that other people erect in their own lives? Do you forget to extend the same mercy God shows to you, to others? Is there a difference between judging the belief system of a person, or the actions of a person and not the person himself? Is it possible to recognize the error of a person and still keep our hearts open to them, to love them? How might this look in real life?

No doubt, after contemplating God's mercy in our lives, we'll feel like Jonah and will "with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you." -Christine

Study Questions:

Q: What are some of the vanities - or little idols - you have erected in your own life? Have you turned your back on mercy? Is there something specific - maybe even small - that you think God is asking you to give up? Has this something become an idol for you? Can you give it up?

Day 9 // He Spit You Ou

Today's Scripture

Jonah 2:10

I first met Jonathon Edwards and his infamous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" inside an American literature book in eleventh grade. It was startling. And I was ashamed. I was ashamed that I was a Christian and this - this God who took delight in damning his creation - was the God that I worshipped every Sunday.

Rather, I was ashamed that this is what everyone thought of the God I worshipped on Sunday. Because I knew that the Jesus I raised my hands to in that evangelical Protestant church was not the angry God depicted here; a God that "holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire."

He was not the God that "abhors you."

And yet, it's that same image of God that many run from; Mr. Edwards' sermon is far reaching. The sermon, first spoken in 1741, echoes nearly 300 years - beyond his congregation, into American Literature textbooks (yes, even today!), and reverberates still in the hearts of many.

He's the God people run from, choosing instead to not believe in a god at all. And why wouldn't they? The homosexuals, the adulterers, the liars, the alcoholics, the drug abusers: the sinners. They know - or at least many hear - only of a God who looks upon them as "worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours."

This is the God many have heard of. This is the God many have read. This is the God many refuse to acknowledge. And yet. Here's Jonah, at the end of chapter two, just vomited up from the fish.

The truth is, our God is a God of mercy. He is a God who pursues us relentlessly, wooing us through storms and waiting for us to respond to that love.

He is not a God who dangles us over the fires of hell by a thread, but one who meets us in the depths of despair - in the belly of a whale, as it were - when we cry out to him. And he reaches out and saves us.

He is a God so in love with His creation that he became man so that he might offer himself as a sacrifice for us.

He is a God of mercy.

We believe in a God of mercy! -Christine

Study Questions:

"He is not a God who dangles us over the fires of hell by a thread, but one who meets us in the depths of despair - in the belly of a whale, as it were - when we cry out to him."

Q: We all know someone who refuses to believe in God because they only know the Jonathon Edwards' god: a wrathful, vengeful God absent of love. How might we convince them otherwise? Do you think we can do it with words? Sometimes in these circumstances we want to see the effects of our good works, yet it's God who saves. Not us. Think of three ways you might be able to show mercy over the next week to someone who only knows - however vaguely - of an angry God.

Day 10 // Do-Over!

Today's Scripture

onah

Jonah 3:1-3

Jonah has just been vomited up by a fish, not that the first few verses of chapter 3 would indicate that.

In the summertime heat, in the small town where I grew up, the neighborhood kids would gather to play baseball. There weren't enough of us for two teams. Probably just enough for us to have a full team. But we made do, thanks to ghost runners and other bizarre and intricate rules that we made up to aid in the playing "fair" of summertime street baseball.

Not being particularly sporty, there was an aspect of pick up ball (of any type) that I was particularly fond of. It was the absolute equalizer of kids everywhere in any type of game: sports or no.

The do-over.

A close game but you weren't ready for that last (and perfect) pitch? Miss it? Do-over. Was the street slick and you had a slow start off the base and so you're out at this one? Do-over.

Tagged "it" when you weren't suspecting? Do-over.

It's an ancient favor, the do-over.

And Jonah employees it with God here. Or rather, God's mercy grants it to Jonah in this, the third chapter. "He is the God of second chances. And third chances. And fourth chances...He's the God who pursues his people relentlessly." To recap, God sent Jonah out but Jonah refused and sailed in the opposite direction instead. A storm blew, Jonah got thrown overboard, was swallowed by a big fish, and then spit up on the shore. Jonah messed up. He realized it. And called a do-over.

And God says okay.

Because He's the God of second chances. And third chances. And fourth chances...He's the God who pursues his people relentlessly. A God, as Robert Barron puts it in The Strangest Way, "who comes after us with a reckless abandon, breaking open his own heart in love in order to include us in the rhythm of his own life."

Just as he pursues Jonah, he pursues us. How far? All the way to the cross.

For Jonah, the answer was yes. When offered a second chance, Jonah responds positively; "he arose and went to Ninevah according to the word of the Lord." - Christine

Study Questions:

Q: Do you need a do-over? As Catholics, the confessional is always open to us. The door of mercy, as it were, is never far away. If you haven't been to confession in awhile, what's holding you back? Will you make an examination of conscience and enter the door of mercy? God's not angry at you. He's the God of mercy. He loves you, and he wants you back.

Day 11/// Truth in Love and Action

MON

Today's Scripture

Jonah 3:4-10

So Jonah got a do-over. And he got up and preached to Ninevah. He told them the truth. And the truth set them free. Quite literally.

So we saw yesterday how Jonah learned his lesson, and when God called him the second time he got up and went. This could not have been easy for Jonah to do, even after having gone through the ordeal he just went through.

Nineveh, after all, was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and no friend of the Israelites. Add to that a kind of nationalism that St. Jerome ascribes to Jonah - and this trek had to be a pilgrimage of the worst kind.

But he did go. And when there, he preached the truth according to what God asked him to: warning the Ninevites they'd be overthrown if they didn't repent.

This is just plain old fashioned crazy talk. Why would a large and powerful city like Ninevah listen to some crazy Hebrew wandering for a day through their town? But Jonah spoke the truth nonetheless.

As Christians, we're not unlike Jonah. That is, we're a part of his divine plan. It's not just one prophet anymore walking around Ninevah. It's a whole lot of Christians walking around the Western world. And we've got a whole lotta 'splainin to do. The truths we carry with us - especially as Catholics - aren't necessarily easy. They aren't going to win us popularity contests. And yet, part of mercy is truth telling. Indeed, Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6). And, thanks be to God, the Truth will set us free. Our message, like Jonah's, is one of freedom. Christian freedom. A truth that allows us to be more fully human by helping us to become more "fully alive."

We are part of His divine plan.

So what then? Should we walk around our modern day Ninevah's handing out tracts and warning of the end of days? Do we stand on the street cor-

ner and harangue passer-by's? No. Rather, our Ninevah is our family, our neighbors, our towns. It is comprised of the relationships we form with the very real people we meet every day.

And as for the truth-telling, Bshp Robert Barron advises us this:

"Because the Lord names sin clearly and then reaches out in love, the discipline of Christian truth-telling must be this: even true speech, offered in a spirit of retribution and hatred, is to be avoided because it undermines itself, becoming spiritually false in the very act of utterance...Christian speech is true, not only to its object, but to itself only when it is realized in love." (The Strangest Way. p. 107)

It comes down, once again, to love in action. That marvelous and wondrous act of the God of the universe pursuing his creation. And his creation reaching out to others in that same charity.

Will it be easy? My guess is no. It wasn't easy for Jonah, so I don't expect it will be easy for us. Of course, the Christian path was never promised to be easy - only a "light yoke." -Christine

Study Questions:

Q: As you move through your own day, consider how much you are willing to help your neighbors, your friends, your family. Before you speak truth to them, ask yourself how much you are willing to help lift their burden? If not, then is the truth really realized in love?

Day 12 // Can We Rejoice in Nineveh?

Today's Scripture

Jonah 4:1-11

"When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive." (Misericordiae Vultus para 3)

Not too long ago I had seen a comment on a popular blog: You are such a testament to a beautiful Catholic life, this poster said.

The blogger has five children, lives on a small hobby farm, and by all blog appearances, celebrates life with intention. Her blog exudes joy: joy in her family, joy in her career, joy in the day to day ordinary of her life. Add to this, it seems that everything she does is done with an intentionality underlined with a spiritual purpose.

Except, this blogger isn't Catholic.

"Mercy will

always be

any sin."

greater than

Not only is she not Catholic - or any brand of Christian - but holds fiercely to the pagan influence recently on ascendance. She has eschewed the "Easter story" as something "some people believe" but not her family. A kind of nice story that comes with chocolate bunnies (organic locally made for her). No silly fairy tales for her family. Only yoga, and Reiki, and mother earth. So when I read that comment - praising the "Catholicity" of this blogger - I should have responded with joy. I should have been happy that someone saw the beauty that had been lived out in truth. Even if the person doing the living didn't recognize that truth.

Sadly, I felt a pang of remorse. Here was a person who claimed absolutely no interest in the God of the Universe providing a better example of what it means to be Catholic than many Catholics! Me too? How many other examples were there of instances where non-Christians, non-Catholics provided better examples of how to live as a Christian than me?

The shame burned me.

And it's the shame that burns Jonah, too. He feels, not only the heat of the sun in a middle eastern desert, but the burning shame of a sorrow that Israel fails to do what Ninevah does. Namely, repent. And in response, Jonah is going to sit out in the middle of the desert and wait for either the destruction of Ninevah or his death. Whichever comes first.

And yet, God in his mercy, continues to protect Jonah. Even as he protected Ninevah. Even as he tried to protect Israel. Mercy is always at the ready. The question is - as it always is - how will we respond? -Christine

Study Questions:

Q: Have you ever been sorrowful at another person's repentance? Jealous, maybe, that they were able to see and respond to something you weren't? The book of Jonah ends with a question: How will Jonah respond to God? And, though we already know the answer, what will Israel's response be to God? Do we have to live with this question in our life? What keeps us from responding - always - "yes" to God?