

Before I begin, I want to say that it's a great honor to be able to share a message with you all today. Even though, during our last term in Japan, we were not members of Kanto Church, Kari and I feel like we've already been richly blessed by many of you. From our very first arrival in Japan, many of you have helped us with getting settled in Yokohama, and a number of you reached out to us in friendship. That's was so important to us as newcomers. So I want you to know that we deeply appreciate that and we hope, by God's grace, to come to know many of you better as the next few years go by.

But today, I want to share with you a story that I really love—Let's think together about this interesting man, Jonah.

Before that, though, I want to share with you a little incident I heard about recently. It's about a man who bought a car through the internet. Have you ever bought anything through the internet? You know, nowadays, you can buy almost anything through the web—rare books, food... I even had a friend in America who bought a 10 meter long sailboat through the internet! That seems a little strange to me, though—how was he able to tell whether or not it really floated???

But anyway, last year I heard this story from a man who bought a car through the internet. It seems that the car's first owner had moved to Europe. And since the owner was no longer in America, after he made the deal with the buyer over the internet, he sent the buyer the key through the mail and sent him the address, explaining to him where the car was parked. Well, the man who bought the car lived in Ohio, but the car was actually in Virginia—about 1,400 kilometers away. So of course the man had to go pick it up.

Now, in Japan, that would not be very difficult—Japan has a great public transportation system. You can get almost anywhere by train or bus or taxi in Japan. But in America, traveling without a car is a little harder. There are almost no trains, very few buses and only certain cities have taxi service.

Well anyway, the man left Ohio by Greyhound bus and traveled to Virginia—to the city where the car was. Even though it would have only taken him about 12 hours to drive there by car, by Greyhound bus, it took him over 20 hours—almost an entire day. So when he got to the city's bus terminal, he was very tired, it was late at night, and it was raining. He asked a person at the bus stop if there were any taxis in that town, and it turned out that no taxis were running that late at night. So he asked someone for directions, and decided to walk the rest of the way to the address.

Well, the parking lot where the car had been left was about 2 miles from the bus stop, so the man had to walk quite a long time in the rain to get to the address. Even though he had an umbrella, by the time he got to the parking lot, his pants were wet and he was feeling especially tired. So when he finally caught

sight of the car he had bought through the internet, he was overjoyed! Finally, he'd be able to drive somewhere and get a little rest, he thought.

But when the man reached into his bag to find the car key, he realized he was in big trouble. There was no key. He searched the bag over and over, hoping he had just missed it, but it wasn't there. Then he remembered that, before he had left his home, he had put the key on the kitchen counter, right in front of the coffee maker, so that he would be sure not to forget it but, when all was said and done, he had just grabbed his bag and left the house without picking up the key.

When I was listening to this man, telling this story, I realized that this was an event in his life that he was *never* going to forget. To have traveled all that way, only to find out that the one thing he really needed, he didn't have!

Have you ever experienced that feeling? Have you ever traveled a long journey, only to find out that the thing you really needed, you didn't have?

Well, Jonah experienced that. In today's Bible reading, we pick up on the last part of a very interesting Bible story. Remember that Jonah is a prophet of God, working in Israel at a time when the people of Nineveh were not well thought of. Nineveh, a city of the Assyrians, was considered to be "enemy territory," so when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh and deliver a divine message, Jonah didn't want to go.

So do you remember what Jonah did? In the first chapter of this book, we learn that, when God told Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh, Jonah decided to do exactly the opposite. He decided not to go to Nineveh, which was to the east, but instead to go towards Tarshish (in modern day Spain), which was to the west.

You remember what happened. In the first three chapters of this book, we learn how Jonah's boat headed for Spain encountered a great storm, how the sailors threw him overboard in order to save the ship, and how he was swallowed by a great fish which had been sent along by God. In chapter two, Jonah's beautiful prayer of repentance is recorded. And after that prayer of repentance, the story goes, God commanded the fish to spit Jonah up on the beach so that he could fulfill his responsibility to go to Nineveh and deliver God's message.

So Jonah finally did just that. Jonah marched into the great city of Nineveh, Israel's enemy, and said (probably with a little secret happiness), "In forty days, this city will be destroyed!"

Now this is where the story gets interesting. Contrary to Jonah's expectations, and contrary to the reader of this story's expectations, there is an amazing turnaround in Nineveh! In chapter three, we read that, from the least important people in the city to the greatest, *everyone* in the city repented of their evil ways! Not only did they repent, but the leaders declared a fast and made the people of the city wear sackcloth. And not only the people—chapter 3 verse 8 says that the animals also were fasting and wearing sackcloth. The story turns into a comedy here—can you imagine sheep and donkeys walking around the city wearing sackcloth??

So in chapter 3 verse 10, we read that “When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.”

And we know what happened after that. Jonah was not happy. Let's look at Jonah's reaction in the first three verses of chapter 4 again...[read 4:1-3]

So the story goes on to say that Jonah left the city and sat down in a booth he made for himself, “waiting to see what would become of the city.” Well, God didn't destroy the city like Jonah wanted. Instead God did something else. He commanded a plant to grow up around the booth to give Jonah shade. And Jonah was very happy. Then, God did something else. He sent a worm to attack the plant and to kill it, so that it would wither. Then God did something else. He sent a hot east wind to make sure Jonah would become good and sweaty...

And Jonah finally erupted in complaint to God again—“God, did you destroy my only shade! Why are you always attacking me? I might as well die!”

But God's answer is short and simple. God asks, “Are you right to be angry about the bush? You are concerned about that bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow—should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

What God is telling Jonah here is that *Jonah has forgotten his key*. Jonah has traveled a long way, through much hardship. But in the end, the only thing he really needed, he didn't have. That key was *compassion*.

Yes, the people of Nineveh were enemies of the Israelites, but they were still people. And 120,000 of them had been headed for annihilation. But did Jonah care? Not really. He cared more about his “air

conditioning system” then he cared about 120,000 people, and all their animals.

I think that this is one of the most important stories in the Old Testament. When we think of the Old Testament, sometimes the images that come to our minds are images of Moses and the law, images of war, or images of God taking vengeance. But in this story, we see the very heart of God—that heart is a heart of compassion.

But it’s all too easy for us, like Jonah, to lose our compassion for others—especially for people we don’t consider to be in our “group.” We have a tendency, just like Jonah, to see people outside of our group as somehow less important—not worthy of our attention, let alone our care. We know in our heads that God loves the world, and that we should, too, but in daily life, it’s so easy to look at the people standing next to us in the trains, walking by us in the supermarket or sitting next to us on the bus as simply objects—maybe worthy of polite acknowledgement, but not worthy of much more.

Those people standing next to us are humans just like us, with hopes and dreams, some of those dreams already extinguished. They are people with families, and with stress, with joy, with pain. They feel just as lost as we do sometimes. And just as alone. Yet sometimes we act as if, whether they live or die, it is no concern of ours. To live in this was is to have lost the key to your life. To live without compassion is not life at all.

When we live without compassion we lose so many things. In this story, we realize that when Jonah lost his compassion, he also lost his *perspective* about what was important and what was not important. Jonah lost a vine, and he says in frustration to God, “I might as well die!”

That’s ridiculous, of course! But many times when we lose our compassion for others, we lose our perspective, just like Jonah. We imagine that unimportant things, like getting the laundry done on time, or watching a favorite TV program, or making a cute obento for our kids, are more important than big things, like trying to build healthy relationships with our neighbors, or having meaningful conversations with our spouses. Details begin to govern our lives, and we lose sense of why we’re doing what we’re doing. But, you know, cars don’t move when you don’t have the key—they’re just stuck. Everything might be in “working order,” but the car just won’t go. Our lives are very much the same. We can be in “working order,” but going nowhere. Do you know what I mean?

Another thing that we lose when we lose compassion is a proper understanding of ourselves. God’s reply to Jonah in the last verse is particularly interesting. God says that there are 120,000 people in Nineveh who *don’t know their right hand from their left*. Now think about that for a moment. I wonder

what Jonah would have thought when he heard that particular phrase? Imagine Jonah standing in Israel when God gave the command to go to Nineveh. To go to Nineveh, Jonah needed to go east—towards his right hand. But what does he do? He goes west—towards his left. So who is it who doesn't know their right hand from their left?

God was telling Jonah that the people of Nineveh were people *just like him*. They couldn't tell their right hands from their left, but obviously *neither could he*. They didn't know how to obey God. But neither did he.

When we lose the key of compassion, we lose the ability to see ourselves for what we really are. Imagining that we're doing everything right because we're using our common sense—because we're simply behaving the same way we think anyone else in the same situation would behave—we forget that all of us are need a God who is “merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

But Jonah was a prophet, right? He was supposed to be clued into God's will a little more so than “regular people.” But in this story, just the opposite is true—he's not clued in. Everyone else in this story—from the sailors on the ship, to the people of Nineveh, even Nineveh's animals—everybody and everything else seems to understand what God really wants from humans better than Jonah does.

This is a particularly important word for us church-goers to hear, because sometimes Christians have a tendency to think that just because we're in the church, we're *de facto* spiritually okay.

But the reality is that churches can be some of the coldest, uncompassionate places on earth. I've been to churches where a visitor can walk into the church, sit for 2 hours, and walk out again without a single person even acknowledging that they were there! That's terrible. But it happens very often in churches in America and, I suppose, in churches in Japan. These churches are what we call in English the “frozen chosen”—churches where compassion is forgotten, where new visitors are seen as “outsiders,” and where telling the good news of God's love in the community is a low priority. Those churches, even though they might have traveled a long journey, have arrived without a key. And all their effort becomes for nothing. And that's a shame.

Finally, when we forget the key of compassion, we lose something else—not just our perspective, not just a right view of ourselves, but we also lose the very heart of the gospel. If you look at chapter 4, verse 2, one more time, you'll see what Jonah really objected to—he objected to a God that was merciful, he objected to a God that was slow to anger, he objected to a God that was abounding in steadfast love. But this, of course, is the center of the gospel. This is the good news.

We have a wonderful message. The same truth we proclaim now is the truth Jonah knew: that God *is* gracious, that God *is* slow to anger, that God *is* abounding in steadfast love. God is willing to look past people's present condition and to see them as his own beloved children.

But we are not so good at doing those things. Sometimes we, like Jonah, are guilty of a failure of imagination. Myself just as much as anyone. When we look at people around us, do we recognize them as God's own beloved children. Does it occur to us that the person sitting next to us on the bus could be the next Billy Graham or the next Martin Luther King, Jr. or the next Toyohiko Kagawa? Or have we, like Jonah, closed our spiritual eyes? Have we forgotten that there is a God in heaven who can transform people—anyone, anywhere—and make them beautiful again? If we've forgotten that, and if that truth *doesn't move us to care for those around us*, we've surely forgotten the heart of the gospel.

One of the peculiarities of the book of Jonah is that it's the only book in the Bible to end with a question. So I want to leave you with a question today, too. We serve a wonderful God—a God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. That God cares about Nineveh. Do you? Do I? If we don't care about what happens to Nineveh—if our hearts aren't moved for that city—we have traveled a very long journey, only to find we have arrived without the only thing we really needed—the key. Do you have it?