Sermon – God's Heart for the Stranger
Sunday July 26, 2026

Introduction

There's something we all do without even realizing it. We draw lines. We draw lines between ourselves and other people.

Sometimes those lines are innocent and kind of funny. For example, we draw lines between:

- Dog people and cat people
- Coffee people and tea people
- Star Wars fans and Star Trek fans
- People who love shawarma… and people who don't know anything about food!

You see, we naturally find people who are like us and we connect around what we have in common. And there's nothing wrong with that. God created us for connection and community.

But sometimes the lines we draw aren't about our favourite foods or movies. Sometimes they go deeper. Sometimes we draw lines around:

- where people come from
- what they believe
- how they vote
- the language they speak
- the choices they make.

And these lines that we draw determine who is "one of us" and who is "one of them".

- Because if they're one of us, we naturally move toward them.
- But if they're one of them, we'll keep them at a distance.

And without even realizing it, we no longer see these people as people anymore. We see them as categories and labels.

The Bible has a word for these people - the stranger.

Now when we hear the word stranger, we think of someone we don't know. But in the Bible, a stranger is someone on the other side of our line—someone who's different.

So here's the question we're going to wrestle with today:

- Who's the stranger in your life?
- Who's the person you've placed on the other side of the line?
- How might God be inviting you today to move toward them instead of away from them?

Sermon Series

Today we're wrapping our series on Jonah. God had called Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, Israel's greatest enemy. The people were known for their violence and cruelty.

So Jonah had drawn a line and Nineveh was on the other side of it. They were the enemy. They didn't deserve compassion.

But throughout the book of Jonah, God pursues people.

- He pursues a runaway prophet,
- He pursues pagan sailors
- He even pursues the people of Nineveh – showing us that no one is beyond the reach of his compassion.

Jonah had initially refused to obey God, but eventually he goes to Nineveh and preaches there. And then something amazing happens.

The people repent. The entire city turns to God and receives his mercy. This is one of the greatest revivals in the Bible!

So you'd expect Jonah to celebrate, right? But he doesn't. Instead he gets angry. And it's here that discover that the greatest problem all along wasn't Nineveh's wickedness; it was Jonah's heart.

And that's what can make this story so uncomfortable for us. Because Jonah isn't just someone we've been learning about. Jonah is someone we see in ourselves. Because if we're honest:

- Don't you draw lines that separate people?
- Aren't there people in your life that you've written off?
- Is there a specific individual right now you refuse to show compassion to?

Normally, when we pray about difficult people, we ask God to change them. But Jonah shows us that **God's greater concern isn't so much about changing their heart, he's greater concern is changing ours.**

So what I want to do today is look at three truths that reveal what God wants to change in us.

1. We Can Pursue God's Mission Without Having God's Heart
2. We Can Let Our Comfort Become More Important Than Showing Compassion
3. We Need God's Compassion to Change Our Hearts

First, We Can Pursue God's Mission Without Having God's Heart

After seeing Nineveh repent, you would expect Jonah to celebrate, right? But instead, verse 1 says:

But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry. (Jonah 4:1)

Now a more literal translation from the original Hebrew is: **But it was evil to Jonah with great evil.**

The word for evil here is the word *ra'ah*. Interestingly, it's the same word used throughout the book to describe the Nineveh's wickedness. But here this word is used to describe Jonah and his lack of compassion.

Do you see the irony?

Jonah is angry that God is showing compassion? Why? Because he's showing it to the wrong people. Nineveh's the enemy. They're violent. They've caused suffering to God's people. That's why Jonah placed them on the other side of the line.

But that's also why Jonah gets angry when God crosses that line. Can you relate?

- Have you ever struggled when someone you didn't like was shown grace?
- When someone who hurt you got a second chance?

Sometimes we think, R*eally, God? Them?* You see, Jonah knew exactly what God was like.

Jonah tells God: **I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love... (Jonah 4:2)**

The problem wasn't that Jonah didn't know about God's compassion. The problem was that he just didn't want him to show compassion to his enemies. Even though Jonah was willing to preach God's message, he wasn't willing to share God's heart.

And that's a reminder to all of us. That it's possible for you and me to pursue God's mission.

- You can serve.
- You can come to church.
- You can share your faith.
- You can get excited about the church's vision.

You can do all these things. But you can do it only as long as the people around you are people you're comfortable with. People who think like you. People who live like you. People who share your values.

But what happens when someone doesn't fit that picture? What happens when they have a different lifestyle, when they have a different story, when they have a different background? What happens when they've hurt you, disagree with you, or make you uncomfortable?

It's often in these moments that we discover Am I serving God's mission? Or am I simply serving people who are just like me.

Because just like Jonah, it's possible for us to pursue God's mission without having God's heart. So what is it that keeps us from having God's heart?

This leads to our second truth. **We Can Let Our Comfort Become More Important Than Showing Compassion**

After God confronts Jonah, Jonah leaves the city.

Verse 5 says: **Jonah had gone out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. (Jonah 4:5)**

It's as if Jonah is hoping God will change his mind and destroy the people. So Jonah waits.

But while he waits, God decides to teach Jonah a lesson. So he provides a plant. The plant grows and gives Jonah shade from the scorching sun.

And verse 6 says: **Jonah was very happy about the plant. (Jonah 4:6)**

Now, this is interesting. This is the only time in the entire book that Jonah is described as being happy. Jonah wasn't happy when the sailors were spared or when Nineveh was delivered from destruction. So what makes Jonah happy? A plant.

And that's the point. Because the plant reveals Jonah's heart. The plant shows Jonah that he cares more about his own comfort than he does the well-being of others.

So what does God do? He provides a worm. The worm destroys the plant. The shade disappears. And once again, Jonah gets angry.

But notice what Jonah gets angry about.

- Jonah doesn't get angry over a city facing destruction.
- Jonah doesn't get angry over thousands of people who are far from God.
- Jonah get angry over the loss of a plant.

And that' exactly what God wants him to see. It's like God is saying:

Jonah, look at your heart. You care more about this plant than you do for the 120,000 people living in this city. You didn't grow it. You didn't cultivate it. It lasted for only a moment. And yet, you get angry over losing a plant but you have no compassion for people made in my image—people I love, people who need my mercy.

How did your comfort become more important to you than my compassion?

Now before we judge Jonah too quickly, don't we struggle with the same thing? Don't we value our comfort more than showing compassion?

- We want to follow God—but only if it doesn't disrupt our plans.
- We want to love others— but only if they don't make us uncomfortable.
- We want to offer forgiveness— but only if it doesn't cost us.

And without realizing it, we start believing that protecting our comfort is more important than showing God's compassion.

But if we're going to become the kind of people who join God in His mission, we need to recognize this: **Compassion will always take us beyond our comfort zone.**

Because:

- Compassion is rarely convenient.
- Hospitality usually interrupts our plans.
- Forgiveness always comes with a cost.

The question isn't Will following Jesus will make me uncomfortable? The question is Am I willing to let God transform my hearts so that His compassion becomes more important to me than my comfort?

So how do we move beyond our comfort and begin to have God's compassion for the stranger?

This leads us to the final truth, **We Need God's Compassion to Change Our Hearts**

The book of Jonah ends in a surprising way. After all the ways Jonah has resisted God, God doesn't give up on him. Instead, he continues to pursue him. He asks Jonah one final question:

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh…? (Jonah 4:11)

And that's how the story ends. Why does it end so abruptly?

Because the question isn't just for Jonah. It's for you and for me. God is asking:

- *If my heart breaks for these people, shouldn't yours?*
- *If I have compassion for them, shouldn't you?*

But notice something else. Even here, God is showing compassion to Jonah! Think about everything Jonah has done.

- He disobeys God.
- He argues with God.
- He gets angry with God.

And yet God doesn't reject him. God doesn't give up on him. Instead, he patiently pursues him and invites him to see people through his eyes.

Do you see what's happening?

The same compassion God showed Nineveh, he's now showing Jonah. And that's the point: Jonah needs God's mercy just as much as Nineveh does.

And that's good news for us. Because if we're honest, we're more like Jonah than we'd like to admit. We run from God, we hold onto resentment, we judge and label people.

And yet God doesn't give up on us. Instead, he's patient with us. He speaks to us in love. He continues to pursue us.

That's what God's been doing throughout the book. And that's what God is still doing today.

You see, all of us were once strangers to God. We were separated from Him by our sin. We were the ones on the outside. We were the ones who needed his compassion. But God didn't leave us there.

Instead, he sent Jesus to cross the greatest line imaginable.

- He entered into our world.
- He took on our sin.
- He died on the cross so that we could be forgiven, welcomed into God's family and receive new life.

That's the gospel.

- It's a story of a Father running toward his prodigal son.
- It's a story of a Saviour laying down his life for his enemies.
- It's a story of a God who crosses lines to bring strangers home.

And when we truly experience this compassion, it changes not only how we see God, but how we see everyone else.

Because the truth is, you can't give away what you've never received. You can't extend compassion if you haven't experienced it yourself.

The reason Jonah struggled to have compassion for Nineveh was because he had forgotten how much he himself needed God's compassion. And the same is true for us. When we lose sight of the mercy God has shown us, our hearts become hard.

- But when we remember how much we've been forgiven,
- when we remember how much we've been welcomed,
- when we remember the price Jesus paid to bring us back to God

Something will change in our hearts.

We'll stop looking at others and asking, *"Do they deserve my compassion?" And Instead*, *we'll start asking*, *"How can I show others the same compassion God has shown me?"*

The truth is, we can't make ourselves more compassionate. **We can't become compassionate by trying harder; we become compassionate by remembering God's compassion for us.** To do that, we need God to transform our hearts.

That's why prayer is so important.

Prayer Ministry Heads-Up
At the end of our service, we're going to have a time of prayer ministry. Our prayer ministers will be available to pray for anyone who would like prayer—for anything God may be speaking to you about from this message or for anything else you'd like prayer for. We'd love to pray with you.

And this is why today's message is so relevant for us. Because God's work in us is never just for us. The compassion he gives us is meant to flow through us. As God transforms our hearts, He sends us out with His heart for others.

God has been giving Cornerstone a vision. A vision to go deeper in our discipleship so that we can reach wider in our mission.

God is calling us to become a church:

- Where newcomers are welcomed.
- Where neighbours are known and cared for.
- Where people from every generation, culture, and background discover that they belong.

But the book of Jonah reminds us that we won't become that kind of church simply because we have this vision. We'll become that kind of church only as we allow God to transform our hearts.

Because before God changes a community, He changes His people first. Before God works through us, He works in us.

And as God's compassion shapes our hearts, we'll begin seeing people the way He sees them. And over time, we'll become the kind of church where strangers become neighbours, neighbours become friends, and friends become family.