

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our redeemer. Amen It was the last day of the Premier League soccer season in England. Manchester City needed to win their final game to become champions. The only other team that c- that could finish top was Arsenal, whose home is in North London. Now, by a cruel twist of fate, Manchester City's opponents that last day were Tottenham, who also play in North London, just a few miles away from Arsenal. Now, like most teams that are separated by a few miles, the fans of Arsenal and Tottenham hate each other. Uh, this is Hatfield and McCoy stuff. Uh, it's one of the biggest rivalries in world sport. It's, it's Alabama and Auburn, uh, Michigan and Ohio State, the Red Sox and the Yankees, and India, uh, and Pakistan at cricket all rolled into one. So, that final day of the season, Tottenham fans were faced with a dilemma. If their team won, they would get a lucrative entry into the biggest European competition the next season, but it would mean that their hated North London rivals would win the Premier League. What would you do? Well, amazingly, the Tottenham fans decided that their hate for their rivals was bigger than their love for themselves. They booed their own team. They cheered when the opponents scored. When Tottenham had the ball, these fans fell silent. Some even turned their backs on the play. The game finished Manchester City 2, Tottenham 0, and the Tottenham fans went home dancing and laughing. They preferred to miss out on playing in Europe next season than allow Arsenal to win the Premier League Human nature. What is wrong with us? We'd rather see our enemy suffer than experience our own victory. What makes this story even more tragic is that I could see myself doing this. The Germans have a word for it, schadenfreude, and it is the taking pleasure in the suffering of another. It's the joy when your mean boss is fired. It's the twisted happiness you get when you go to the 20th high school reunion and the prom queen has put on 100 pounds, and the varsity quarterback has lost all his hair Germans call it schadenfreude. I call it Jonah syndrome. We all remember learning about Jonah at

Sunday school, and it was a cute story. God calls Jonah to preach over there, and he takes a boat over there. There's a near storm, a near- a s- a storm, a near shipwreck, a, a huge sea creature, and a pile of fish vomit on the beach with a prophet sitting in the middle of it. And we all learned that if you run away from doing what God is calling you to do, you may end up having to do it anyway. Hear the word of the Lord. Don't be fish vomit. What your Sunday school teacher failed to tell you was that Jonah was a bit of a jerk. If his clothes smelled of fish sick, his soul reeked even worse of self-righteousness, bigotry, and judgmentalism. And the portion of his book that we read this morning rips away the mask of the picture book Jonah and shows us his true ugliness. The reason Jonah runs away from God's call to preach to Nineveh is that he hates Ninevites worse than a Tottenham fan hates Arsenal. Ninevites were sinners, immoral. Jonah is nauseated by the idea of even visiting their city, let alone wasting the word of God on them. And when he does eventually preach to them, it's one of those turn or burn sermons, full of blood-curdling promises of God's judgment unless they stop doing evil and turn to the Lord. And having discharged his duty, he finds a good seat from where he can enjoy the beautiful sight of God pouring down fire and brimstone upon Nineveh. But things don't go the way Jonah had hoped. The Ninevites, they only went and repented, and God only went and forgave them. So Jonah is not happy, and like a spoiled child, he pouts and complains to God, "I knew this would happen. I knew you would be all gracious to them, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Why can't you wipe them out anyway? It's not fair." Here is a man filled with hate preaching God's love. A man seeking judgment while preaching God's mercy. And his childish reaction continues. He does that manipulative thing with God. He says, "God, kill me. I'd be better off dead." Oh, the drama. And God says, "Jonah, why are you angry?" But Jonah's tantrum continues. He storms out of the city and sits down in the blazing sun and hopes to die. But God, the ever-merciful, doesn't leave Jonah to get sunstroke. He makes a plant shoot up

and cover Jonah so that he gets some shade, and Jonah begins to feel a bit better. But then God strikes the plant with an infestation, and it withers as quickly as it had shot up, and this sets Jonah off again on another Oscar-winning display of self-pity. "Oh, God", he says, "it is better for me to die than to live." And God whispers, "Is it right for you to be so angry about the death of a shrub?" And Jonah says, "Yes, angry enough to die." And God says, "You have been concerned about this bush, even though you did not plant it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" And amazingly, the Book of Jonah finishes right there. The only book of the Bible to end with a question, "Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Jonah resents the love of God. Now, in his favor, he does have a strong sense of right and wrong. He knows his Bible. He genuinely hears from God. He faithfully preaches the message God gives him, eventually, and he understands God's justice. Here's Nineveh, this sin city, and it needs God's punishment. But he has no grasp whatsoever of God's mercy. His cold, hard, legalistic heart has no room for God's compassion. God, for him, was a judge in a criminal court, or some cosmic policeman who watches and waits for people to do something wrong and then smites them. Jonah's theology had no room for the God who loves, forgives, weeps, who longs for his people, and who later was to send his son to die for the sins of his world. I have a hunch that we hear, uh, Jonah syndrome even today when we read Christian bloggers or influencers stating that natural disasters are God's punishment for sin, and the death and suffering are fair. And the fact that I haven't lost everything or died in a natural disaster shows that I am not as much of a sinner as they are. I think the heart of Jonah syndrome is that he sees doctrinal purity as more important than people. In fact, he prefers shrubs to human beings. He gets angry when his plant dies, but is very pleased at the prospect of God wiping Nineveh off the face of the planet. And those

Christians are still around. Many Christians prefer liturgy to human beings, or music, or sacred buildings, or any Christian stuff. All of us who claim the name of Christ need to be vigilant, watching our words and attitudes in case we catch Jonah syndrome. In my best moments, I despise the spirit of Jonah, especially when I see it in myself. At my very best, I prefer the unfair God, the God who puts people before rules and traditions, the God who loves and blesses even though the recipient does not deserve it. Who is it who sits and pouts under a shrub when there's a repentance party going on in the valley? Who isn't down there celebrating that people who were lost have now been saved and the Kingdom of God has invaded the city? I'll tell you who. The man or woman with Jonah syndrome, who resents God, who despises sinners, who doesn't understand how much they too have been forgiven. Years ago, when I lived in Pennsylvania, I took a wedding, and afterwards I was chatting politely with guests over the finger buffet when a man I'd never seen before, in his late 20s, surged into my personal space and insisted that he had to talk to me urgently. He almost physically grabbed me and dragged me away. He confessed to me that he was guilty. A decade earlier, as a high school athlete, he had been a bully. He told me about an occasion when he had teased and even physically abused a classmate because he was not athletic. And now, this object in the rear-view mirror was closer than it appeared, and he could not get his victim out of his head. He wanted to know if God could forgive him. Of course, I did not need to tell him that he did indeed need forgiveness, that bullying blights and even ends the lives of children and young people. He didn't need to be told what he painfully knew. What he did need to hear was that God loved him. Like a proud parent, even when he caused mayhem in other people's lives. I felt Jesus in that conversation. I felt his pride in his son, who had been abusive and violent, but who was now returning to his father, contrite and ashamed. As his penance, his act to make amends and to show that he was sincere, I told him that God was calling him to be an outstanding role model of godly virtues to

the boys now in his life. He went away pumped up, jaw jutted like the athlete he was, determined to become involved in the lives of boys and influence them for good. Because when God sends you to speak into the lives of his people, it's the end of Jonah syndrome. It's a tale of reconciliation, not destruction. A story of forgiveness, not punishment. A love story, not a horror movie. Amen.