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“Have you reason to be angry?” (Jonah 4:3).

The story of Jonah was a well-known and popular tale at the time of Jesus that promoted the idea of universal salvation rather than the claim that God only loved the Chosen People, the Jews. Jonah is a reluctant prophet because he does not want to go to preach conversion to the Ninevites, Israel’s sworn enemy. He wants them destroyed for invading and conquering Israel.

What Jonah learns from his experience of being swallowed by a fish and delivered to Nineveh, is that God is merciful, and because the Ninevites repented they receive mercy. This infuriates Jonah, so a little parable occurs when a gourd plant springs up to shade him from the hot sun, but then is suddenly taken away. He complains to God, who explains that mercy is a pure gift, and God is free to be generous even with Israel’s enemies. Mercy flows freely to all; there is no quid pro quo or any right to expect mercy or to decide who God should give it to or withhold it from.

Because we are human and subject to many emotions, we devise our own view of who should be praised or punished. It makes us angry when people on our evil list seem to get away with it, while good people like us endure suffering. We forgive

some who deserve it or humbly ask for it, but we withhold forgiveness from others who offend us and don't deserve it. Who hasn't fantasized about bad things happening to certain people to teach them a lesson? But we quickly learn that anger is exhausting and precludes any chance of resolution. Letting go sets us free and entrusts others to the grace of God, which alone can change hearts and bring people around.

Jesus' prayer, the Our Father, has at its core the spirit of forgiveness. If we want to be holy as our heavenly Father is holy, we must imitate God's unconditional love for all, our enemies as well as our friends. Only then will we be free of the burden of judging others, free of the need to keep track of other people's faults and offenses, and free to devote that same energy to praying for others, especially those who have hurt us. To live in this spirit is to discover the scandal and the secret of the Gospel, which can reveal the image of God as our true self.

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