

Can't Get No Satisfaction
First Reading: Colossians 3:12-15
Second Reading: Jonah 3:10 - 4:11

1985 Chicago Bears. Ron Rivera - Willie Gault - Jim McMahon - Mike Singletary - William "Refrigerator" Perry. The Super Bowl Shuffle. Devastating defense. Charismatic coach "Iron" Mike Ditka. Super Bowl Champions, blowing out the New England Patriots 46-10. The Lombardi Trophy. Somebody's going to DisneyWorld. Yet, Walter Payton, the legendary icon of the game of football and the spiritual energy of the Bears, the man of such high character the trophy for the nicest, most benevolent player in the game is named after him, is sulking in a broom closet while the champagne corks are popped and the cigars are fired up. What's wrong with this picture?

Walter "Sweetness" Payton was nearing the culmination of a hall of fame career, at the time having rushed for more yards than any running back in NFL history — Power — Brains — Speed — Agility — Grace. He'd bolt, boogie, and bully his way down the field even when his team wasn't very good. Yet, in 1985, the Bears (*or Da Bears*) caught lightning in a bottle and throttled the rest of the league all the way to Super Bowl dominance.

But, as the confetti fell, Walter was peeved, displeased, cheated, aggrieved, and offended.

Why? With the game already won and the only question remaining being how bad the beatdown would be, the mood was light, even triumphant on the Chicago sideline. The Bears were on the verge of an unnecessary touchdown, and amplifying the festive mood, the coach sent in that giant defensive tackle from Clemson, the 300 lbs “Fridge,” to take the ball over the goal line, giving the world a good laugh at the novelty of it all. Lineman becomes a headliner for once. But, that move meant the Walter didn’t score a Super Bowl touchdown. Now, he did carry the ball 22 times that day, 5 times inside the 10 yard line, but he didn’t get to punch it in for the score that would have no impact on the result.

Every pro football player, whether they truly think it or not, will tell you that what they want more than anything is a Super Bowl ring (I love Jennifer Garner’s observation about that in the movie *Draft Day*: “How is it that the ultimate prize in the most macho sport ever invented is a piece of jewelry?”). But Walter got the jewelry to go with his rushing titles, records, MVP award, and the adoration of a public far beyond the world of Chicago

and the game of football. Yet, he didn't get the ball to score that inconsequential touchdown, and so he chose not to celebrate, not to eat the icing on the grand cake of his career, and instead went to the equipment closet to sulk.

The day toward which he had worked so hard; the prize for which he had yearned; it was all his to savor, but Walter chose the role of Alexander, and when the Refrigerator lumbered over the goal line, Walter could tell it was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, even though his mom had probably told him that some days are like that, even in Australia.

Sometimes things don't go as you had imagined them. Sometimes, your package arrives but the product doesn't look like it did in the catalogue. Sometimes, you achieve what you've worked for, watch a plan come together, earn the award, own the opposition, yet you feel dissatisfied with the result; or maybe one ill-timed comment hits you the wrong way; or could it be that the gratitude for your amazingness is, not muted, but not full throated, either. Maybe you are the performer who had to settle for one encore. Or, maybe you weren't the only one to shine, and sharing applause is not easily done. Or, maybe, just maybe, you were half-hoping that the

plan would fail, so you could watch a frenemy squirm, or be the one to make the I-told-you-so speech. Or, maybe ... maybe, you are just wired to complain. You live in the world between simmer and boil.

I have to think that if heaven was not all heavenly, Jonah would be the target of ridicule at the Prophet's Bar and Grill. *Dude, what's your problem? What in the world were you whining about? God gives you five measly words to say, and you don't even make it to the city square before heading out of town. And yet, everyone heeds your warning, from the king down to the mouse roaming among the columns at the pagan temple. Everybody repents! It's a prophet's Super Bowl win!*

When Jeremiah prophesied, his own family dealt treacherously with him, insulting him behind his back. Jeremiah wasn't allowed to marry; he was beaten and put in stocks by the chief officer of the temple, a priest; the Lord ordered Jeremiah to go around with a heavy yolk around his neck as some kind of object lesson for the Israelites; when Jeremiah preached, he was mocked and laughed at; King Zedekiah let the preacher-types throw Jeremiah in a cistern where he sank in the mud.

Hosea was pushed into a marriage that on its best days would be called dysfunctional, the Lord hoping Israel would see it as a metaphor for their relationship to God. Ezekiel was instructed to eat a scroll, bringing new meaning to the idea of devouring a book; and then there was that time Ezekiel was bound with cords and rendered speechless. Their laments at least seemed rational.

But Jonah? Jonah is given a speech consisting of five words, which he half-heartedly delivers to just a portion of the intended audience, and though in enemy territory, the response is universal repentance. Every living being, from the king's golf foursome to Gilda the milk goat, confesses their guilt and commits to change.

Way to go, Jonah! You've just won the Super Bowl of prophecy. They listened. The Ninevites actually listened, and as a result, God changed his mind. Do you know what that means, Jonah? You had the privilege to participate in the rescue of a large city; over a hundred thousand people and countless animals are still on the green side of the grave, looking forward to tomorrow, and you, Jonah, were the Lord's mouthpiece for their redemption.

Jonah should be thrilled, or at least relieved. He had delivered hard words in enemy territory, and not only did he walk out alive, the Ninevites had listened and taken heed. Oh, happy days are here again ... or not.

Jonah, you see, is in a mood. You have that friend or relative. You come into the house all full of Pharrell Williams positivity, *Clap along if you know what happiness is to you*. But someone immediately pulls you aside and tells you to take a chill pill, because your friend or your momma is “in a mood,” a nasty, riled, angry, bite your head off kind of mood, and you’d be well advised to bury your smiles in your pocket and steer clear. The text says — *When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it ... But this was very displeasing to Jonah*. The literal translation of the Hebrew here is — *He was displeased with a great displeasure*. So, is that doubly displeased? Oh, and in addition the author adds that Jonah is angry, the literal Hebrew being - *Burned up!*

Burned up! Why? Because an entire city escaped destruction. Grandparents, toddlers, teens, and infants; sheep, goats, and Ferdinand the Bull, all alive to see another day, in no small part because Jonah finally did

what God had asked him to do ... and this just burns Jonah up, like the NASCAR fan fuming on the way out of Talladega because he didn't get to see a big wreck, like the reporter irate because there wasn't a riot at Walmart on the day after Thanksgiving, like the time you were peeved that the person you don't like received the community service award, like the day you were sitting poolside sipping on a margarita and complaining about the maid getting food stamps, like the moment in church you were miffed upon hearing that the mercy of God extends to your enemy.

We celebrate mercy as long as we are the ones receiving it. We'll accept mercy when we're self-aware enough to know we don't deserve it. But the sweetness of mercy quickly sours when we start to assess who else is worthy of it. Jonah is a person of faith who's been to temple enough to know and recite the creedal language. In chapter 1, Jonah confesses to the storm-spooked sailors, *"I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."* When Jonah prayed, he used the vocabulary of the Psalms and Proverbs — *"I called to the Lord out of my distress and he answered me" ... "Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty" ... "Deliverance belongs to the Lord."*

Jonah was throwing out every verse he had memorized from his youth when he was sinking in the sea and marinating in the stench of the fish's belly. Surely Jonah was looking to and counting on the very characteristics of the God that he scorns here in Chapter 4. In the belly of the fish you know Jonah is praying repeatedly the words so prevalent in scripture, "*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love ... The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*" Yet, when those same words are applied to *those* people, *those* nasty Assyrians, Jonah's tone is drastically altered. *I knew it, I knew it, I just knew it. "O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."* How dare you!

The same Jonah who was so conciliatory and grateful in the safety of the belly of the fish is now fuming, is on fire, is resentful when the Assyrians receive the mercy that he had just celebrated for himself. As one scholar put it, "If the Assyrians are in on the love of God, then Jonah wants out." And literally, Jonah walks out, resenting the very grace of God upon which his own life depends.

Why do we find it so hard to celebrate God's mercy to those who are not us? The virus that has plagued the people of God from the beginning is the mistaken notion that we deserve God's mercy more than the other folks. How much resentment, hatred, prejudice, exclusion, and violence have sprung from the fear and anger that somebody out there may receive what we do not think they deserve? Jonah is seething. Jonah's ire is burning. Jonah is us.

We live in a time when anger has flooded over the banks of civility and reason, filling cities, neighborhoods, villages, and the rural landscape with the toxic sludge of bitter resentment. To what end? What does it accomplish?

Frederick Buechner surmised that "of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways is a feast fit for a king [or a tyrant, or a would-be dictator]. The chief drawback

is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is **YOU.**" (Frederick Buechner, *Whistling In the Dark*)

Is that where we're headed in our society? Skeletons in want of a soul?

I love God's word to Jonah and us here: "*Is it right for you to be angry?*" It's an important enough question that God asks it twice: "*Is it right for you to be angry?*" The author of Ephesians understood the toxic potential of anger when he advised: "*Do not let the sun go down on your anger.*"

If only, in the vast majority of circumstances, we could pause the enraged rant long enough to hear the Lord's question, "*Is it right for you to be angry?*" It is mighty hard to celebrate the grace of God when we're too busy resenting those included in it. Amen.