I sometimes come up with theories that are really awesome. At least they seem that way when I am by myself and no one is around to point out the flaws. And with this warning what you are about to hear is one of those awesome untested theories. It is meant to explain or at least partly explain why we are so mad at each other these days. So here it is. I think at least one of the reasons for this anger is that we spend so much time focusing on and promoting the least interesting and least important parts of ours and other’s personalities. Meaning we usually end up devoting a lot of time to what we and each other think about politics or sports teams. Imagine going back 500 years and trying to explain a soccer riot to an English peasant – you see Juventus fans attacked Liverpool fans because, well….you know…. you gottta support the team. As Becky says in Thackery’s *Vanity Faire*, “Everybody is striving for what is not worth the having!” We focus on uninteresting and unimportant things and then get irate when someone does not share our enthusiasm. And in many ways, this is what is at the root of the conflict in our Old Testament passage from Jonah today. Jonah focuses on the least interesting part of the story, namely himself.

For most people the one thing they know about Jonah is the whale. And while the text actually says it was a great fish and not a whale, I am not sure how relatable that part of the story is. Unless you are used to having giant fish swallow you and later vomit you up on shore. The part of the story I want to look at comes from today’s text which happens near the end of Jonah’s story. Up to this point we have seen Jonah commanded by God to go to Nineveh to tell them to repent of their sins or be destroyed. Jonah hates this idea and decides to go the other direction. This led God to send the fish to swallow him and deposit him near Nineveh. It is at this point where Jonah finally does what God asks and tells the people of Nineveh to repent, which they subsequently did. That is where we pick up today. God is pleased by this repentance and decides not to destroy Nineveh. It should be a happy ending. If it were an 80’s sitcom there would be a close-up of Jonah sitting in his bedroom having learned his lesson all while an introspective version of the show’s theme song plays in the background. But that is not what happens and that is what makes things so relatable. Relatable because it is all so human. And by human, I mean petty. Jonah instead of being happy or chastened is livid and says, “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. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” Going back to my opening theory, Jonah is focused on something small. We are not exactly told what it is that makes him so upset with God. However, if I were guessing, I would say that Jonah was holding on to his view of how the world should work and was unwilling to have this view challenged or changed. To his mind Ninevites were rotten and could never be redeemed. But since they are redeemed, he is mad and takes it out on God.

And as I said this character flaw of Jonah’s is not really just his -- it is all very human. We humans are very odd creatures and oftentimes would rather burn the whole world to the ground than see our views proved wrong. My guess is that had the Ninevites not repented and were struck down by God Jonah would be in a wonderful mood this morning, praising God for his great and mighty sword. He might have even sold t-shirts to commemorate the event. But Jonah’s smallness will not let him see the wonder and beauty of people repenting and pleasing God. He is not happy that those who were lost are now found. His smallness comes from a type of self-absorption. He wants to be the alpha and the omega. He wants the world to run in accordance with his will. And this impulse is nothing new. For as you recall the first sin, the one in the garden, came because humans wanted to be like God. But we make rotten gods. We end up like Jonah chewing out God for abounding in steadfast love. So, the question I want to ask is how do we stop being petty tyrants? How do celebrate with God when something goes right in the world, rather than wallowing in anger and self-pity because it was not what we wanted.

And in answering this question I believe the church has a large part to play in setting things right, but I also want to acknowledge that this is something where the church has greatly failed. Humans have a natural inclination to want to be self absorbed. For example, according to a recent survey 25% of Generation Z does not want to have children and the most common reason given as to why is so that they can have more time for themselves. And I am not against having time for yourself, but it cannot be done to the exclusion of the outside world. That is, we cannot spend so much time on ourselves that we ignore others and ignore God. To my mind one of the greatest things that the church can offer to get us out of our self-absorption is hope, the message that there is a God who is filled with steadfast love. This hope is not pollyannish, ignoring the world’s problems but rather acknowledges that there is something larger and greater towards which we strive. Being a Christian does not mean that our problems disappear but that they are subsumed in something larger – a place where joy is greater than our fears.

Jonah, today, has had a lot of time with himself. A lot of time to think about all the ways Jonah has been mistreated and look how much fun that was. I mean he is grumpy about things going right for other people. He is so far inside himself that he cannot gaze up and see that ther is something greater in which to have hope. Contrast this with the story of St. Lawrence who was martyred in the third century by being roasted alive. If there were ever a set up for a depressing story, I think this would be it. But somehow in that misery he found hope. The story goes that midway through being roasted alive Lawrence said, “I'm well done on this side. Turn me over!" That is the kind of joy and hope we are to have as Christians. In the midst of the worst, you can make a joke because you are looking to something greater and more joyous. I mean the word Gospel literally translates as good news. But the only way we can be like Lawrence is to have the faith and the outlook that Lawrence had. He did not look inward and think only on himself but lived in the fullness of God’s love. I know that Disneyland claims to be the happiest place on earth but that should really be the church. And the wonderful thing is the Church can offer a deeper and more everlasting joy than the Magic Kingdom. The fact of the matter is God calls us to look up. To see the wonder and awe and steadfast love that he has and that he freely gives to us. Jonah cannot see that today, all that he can see is that his plans for the world were not fulfilled and he is miserable. He cannot let go of his issues and embrace what God was doing but we can so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.