

Sermon "The Jonah in Us All" For January 12, 2014 in Winsted  
Jonah 1-4 Ephesians 4:25-5:2

I can remember, back in nursery school, realizing that not everybody likes everybody else. In this case, it was Petey and Edmund. From day one, those two boys could not get along. Petey refused to be in line near Edmund, because Edmund would trip Petey or do something else mean to him. The animosity between the two had not ended by first grade, because I remember how mad Petey was at me when I attended Edmund's birthday party...

Imagine, if you can, someone you really dislike today. Some of you may actually feel so strongly negative about someone that you think your life would be better if that person were to truly disappear from the face of the earth. Perhaps it is someone who cheated you, or laid you off, or who told lies about you, or did something to your family, or hurt you deeply in some other way. If you personally cannot come up with a name or a face, you probably know somebody who can.

If you really don't find yourself thinking of someone you cannot tolerate, consider our world situation... In the Central African Republic, Muslims and "Christians" are killing each other; bombs are going off every day in Iraq now; Palestinians and Jews continue their animosities; and new terrorism attacks are threatening the upcoming Olympic Games in Russia. We read and hear of new violence, near and far, every day. Day before yesterday I read a newspaper account of a man who murdered several cats being cared for by his girlfriend's family. I have little tolerance for those who are cruel to animals...

Imagine, though, were God to approach us and say, "Go to this person you cannot stand, the person you detest, and warn that person that because of his/her wickedness, I am bringing my judgment upon him/her."

If you really detest the person, your first feeling may be, "Finally, that person is getting what s/he deserves!" But then, you think again. "I don't want anything to do with that person! Besides, what if that person listens and reforms? I'm not going to warn that rotten person!! No way!!"

If you have been able to touch these feelings at all within yourself, then you understand - at least to some extent - how it was for Jonah. Jonah absolutely hated the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was an Assyrian city, and Assyria was a dreaded enemy of the people of Israel. Why would anybody be expected to go to the land of an enemy and warn them about God?? Israel was God's chosen people; the Assyrians were not!!

Here comes to us, even today, the message of God.... Do not draw boundaries and form definitions that only I, the Lord God, can draw. Whenever someone is excluded, we risk going against what God wants. Early on in the book of Genesis (Gen 12), God called Abram/Abraham and gave him the promise that Abraham's descendants would be God's

chosen people... But God was clear: The chosen people would be blessed in order that they might be a blessing to all the world. So even as God got specific, God also had an eye on the whole world, all the peoples of it...

Jonah didn't like his assignment much more than some of us do. Those Ninevites were "bad guys," and he saw himself as a "good guy." So Jonah hopped a ship to head totally in the opposite direction from Nineveh. God said GO, but Jonah said NO! (*Theme of the children's sermon*)

Well, we heard the rest of the story. The ship was beset by a storm, a terrible storm. Finally, Jonah confessed that he was the cause, that God was upset with him. To his credit, Jonah TOLD the sailors to put him overboard. Reluctantly, they did. But God wasn't finished with Jonah yet! A big fish (folks often say whale) gulped Jonah down and there he sat in a huge fish belly for three days until the fish "vomited" Jonah out on a shore, not far from where he needed to be to get the message to Nineveh!! (Guess who was in charge?!)

So Jonah walked through sprawling Nineveh, perhaps only whispering God's message of judgment to the people; but a strange thing happened: the people of Nineveh heard the message and changed their ways, pronto!

While Jonah sat on a hill hoping to watch the destruction of Nineveh, God forgave the people and gave them another chance. Jonah FUMED!! "I knew it!! I just knew it!!" God's mercy was bigger than Jonah wanted it to be! (Pause)

There is so much that can be hurtful between persons and peoples. Resentments seem to come almost naturally, as though we were bred to be jealous (the first child ever born killed his brother out of jealousy - Genesis 4), as though we are supposed to compete and fight and be unwilling to forgive. Whether it's two boys in nursery school, two nations competing for the same land, or people of different races or religions, there seems to be plenty of hatred to go around, and even we who call ourselves Christians seem to derive some comfort in "justifiable hatred." If we can justify ourselves, then we think hating is okay. We hate the terrorists, naturally, because they frighten us and because they have deeply hurt so many. We may hate the ex-spouse, or the priest who molested so many young people.... It's justifiable, we reason, because of the harm done.

But we are Christian, and Jesus challenged even "justifiable" hatred. "Love your enemies, pray for those who have injured you..." (Matthew 5:44) Paul may make this a bit more palatable in Romans 12 when he says, "By doing good things for your enemies, by repaying evil with good, you heap burning coals on their heads..."

We must always be careful, as persons who would follow Jesus, to ask God to show us where and whether to draw lines between ourselves and others. And we must also keep our ears open to God's call to US. God may be asking US to "go to Nineveh" or somewhere else we may not

want to go... Only by so doing - by doing God's will - will we discover the blessing possible for our lives.

One of my favorite old stories tells about how during World War I a man died and his two friends desperately wanted to give him a decent burial. They found a cemetery in a nearby village. It happened to be a Roman Catholic cemetery and the dead man had been a Protestant. When the two friends found the priest in charge of the burial grounds, they requested permission to bury their friend, but the priest refused because the man had not been a Catholic. When the priest saw their disappointment, he explained that they could bury their friend outside the fence. This was done. Later, they returned to visit the grave but could not find it. Their search led them back to the priest and, of course, they asked him what had happened to the grave. The priest told them that during the night he had been unable to sleep because he had made them bury their friend outside the fence. So he got up and moved the fence to include the dead soldier. In the general message of the Bible, and in the giving of Jesus Christ to the world, God has "moved the fence" to include the undeserving, even us.

The message is that God moves the fences and will not be held by the tight and narrow boundaries WE might cement into place. God cares for every person. If we hear the call to follow Jesus, we are called to be part of something larger than our prejudices, our comfort zones, even our idea of what a "church" should be. God is the one who decides the boundaries of the fences and the wideness of God's mercy.

There is much in life, in our society, that Jonah would not like today. Surely there is also much from which God would have us turn today in our lives. Repent, make some new choices, see your life differently, and experience in new ways the mercy and love of God.

This past week we watched as ice cutting ships tried to and finally did rescue passengers on a ship trapped in ice at the South Pole. We celebrated as changing currents freed an ice-cutting ship. The current crisis reminded folks of another expedition. The year was 1915. Twenty-eight men were huddled together on an ice floe. They had set out over a year before to reach the South Pole. They knew now that they were never going to reach their goal. For nine months, their ship, the Endurance, had been trapped in the ice. Now the ice was shifting, the Endurance was slowly being crushed and would soon sink out of sight. They went back to the ship to retrieve what supplies they could salvage. Then they made their plans for survival. They were 1200 miles from the nearest outpost of civilization. Their leader, Ernest Shackleton, told them that their only hope lay in reaching Paulet Island and sailing from there. Paulet Island was 350 miles of the most formidable terrain on earth; they would proceed under grueling conditions, carrying their own supplies and dragging behind them three 20-foot boats over the jagged ice.

Shackleton said to them: "You must leave behind everything that is not essential. You must give up every ounce of needless weight, for your very lives are at stake." Shackleton pulled a handful of gold sovereigns out of his pocket and flung them into the snow. He took out a gold

watch and chain and dropped them onto the ice. Then the men gasped as he drew from his parka his single most prized possession in the world: the inscribed Bible which Queen Alexandra had given him at the beginning of the expedition. He lay the Bible on the pile of discarded treasures. "Your lives are at stake," he repeated. Soon after, the men turned their backs on the sinking ship and most of their possessions, and followed Shackleton across the barren ice. After many harrowing experiences, every man made it to safety. (*National Geographic* has recently featured Shackleton's expedition)

This was quite unlike another expedition in 1840, where Sir John Franklin led 140 men to their deaths as they tried to reach the North Pole. Once the boats were lost, the sailors set out hiking for help. Over a period of several years the bodies of these men were recovered. The corpses were found loaded down with backgammon boards, tea, and much the engraved sterling silver from the ship. Even staring into the icy jaws of death, those men had been unable to leave the silverware behind. They had been unable to turn their backs on the things they thought valuable so as to make it possible to live. (pause)

Hear the words of Paul as he wrote to the Christians in Ephesus (4:25, 31): *Therefore, having laid aside falsehood, each of you must speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another...You must put away every kind of bitterness, anger, wrath, quarreling and evil, slanderous talk. Instead, be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.*

May we put down what God would have us put down and let go of what holds us back from loving others and really living. When God says GO, may we never say NO; when God tells us "This-a-way," may we never run "That-a-way." So may our living shine to honor our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.