

Forgiveness Makes Us One

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“And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city. . . ?” -- Jonah 4:11

If you were in church last Sunday, you may recall that I recommended the book of Jonah as a good place to start reading the Bible. As it happens, the first lectionary reading assigned for this morning is from the book of Jonah, and since God seems to have laid a golden opportunity right in front of me, I've grabbed it with both hands to help give all of you a running start on your Bible reading.

Barb and I have read out loud the entire book of Jonah – it took about nine minutes, total – and if you were reading along, you've now got one book of the Bible under your belt and you have only sixty-five to go.

The story of Jonah is about how not to be a prophet. But more than that, it's about how not to be religious. Indeed, it's about something even deeper than that, which is how not to be a person, a simple human being. The cold-hearted, vinegar-faced prophet from the northern kingdom of Israel is the paradigm of what a God-loving, creature-loving “human merely being” as E. E. Cummings called us is not supposed to be. This prophet, who hears the voice of God as clearly as anyone could, does exactly what you should not do in response.

Jonah hears God's voice telling him to preach repentance to Nineveh – and he runs in the opposite direction.

Jonah's preaching sets off a red-hot revival among the Ninevites – even the livestock have to wear sackcloth – and he becomes so angry you can practically see the wisps of smoke curling above his head as he pouts outside the city walls.

When Jonah gets from God what he wants – like the shade from a leafy bush – he's happy; but when the Ninevites receive from God what they want – a reprieve from God's justified wrath – Jonah is so mad he wants to die.

This is how not to go through life, and what's turned Jonah into a prophet-turned-inside-out is his unwillingness to forgive. At the heart of religion lies forgiveness, because at the heart of every person lies wrong-doing, and the only mechanism we have for dealing with wrong-doing is the mechanism God uses in the story of Jonah, which Jonah himself seems incapable of using in turn, and that is forgiveness.

What drives Jonah crazy is God's willingness to forgive people Jonah doesn't want to forgive, and at the end of his story, Jonah is still holding himself apart, in seething self-righteousness, from the world of forgiveness in which the Ninevites and God have been reunited. If sin divides us, it is forgiveness that makes us one.

As we leave Jonah sitting in the heat of the desert sun, we hope and pray that Jonah may someday grow up spiritually and emotionally and psychologically into the kind of person we'd want one of our children to marry; but at this stage in his life – and only God knows how long that stage will last – he's not there yet, and he clearly has a long way to go. Jonah is spiritually and emotionally and psychologically stuck somewhere between age nine and age nineteen, and he looks ridiculous as a result.

And Jonah's not alone, at least not as a type. There are plenty of us who are stuck somewhere back around age five, with “Now I lay me down to sleep” religion. What

someone once said of Catholic priests could equally well be said of any of us, "There are some folks who have seventy years' of experience, and there are some folks who have one year of experience repeated seventy times."

We all get stuck, but Jonah is so stuck he's a caricature, and that's the sign that the book of Jonah isn't history. It's satire, and we religious folks tend not to recognize satire, which can make us look a little ridiculous at times, too.

The ancient author of the book of Jonah never intended for us to read the story as a dispatch from the front lines; it's a religious folktale, and it's deliberately overdrawn.

At the front end of the story, are we supposed to think that Jonah slept serenely through a storm at sea that terrified everyone but him? Of course not.

And at the back end of the story, are we supposed to think that a plant grows tall enough in one night to provide shade from the desert sun? Again, of course not.

And in the middle of the story, are we supposed to think that Nineveh is fifty-four miles wide, which is about how far a person can walk in three six-hour days of walking at three miles per hour? That would be like walking from here to Ashtabula, and no city in the ancient world suffered from that kind of sprawl.

The first hearers of Jonah's story knew all of this, just as they knew that Jonah's three-day-and-three-night time-out in the belly of the fish was part of the satire. The book of Jonah is a running joke, but we humorless religious folks miss most of the fun because we obsess about the details and miss the point, which is Jonah's religious small-heartedness, Jonah as a religious dog-in-the-manger, Jonah as anti-prophet. Jonah's defective spirituality we're to take very seriously indeed, and religious people going to the wall over the historicity of the story of Jonah makes no more sense than trying to find the pig sty of the prodigal son. The point in both parables is theological, not historical, and in both cases that point is the difficulty most of us have forgiving.

And that's one of the reasons our midweek Lenten program this year will be about forgiveness. If you haven't yet signed up for this series of suppers, services, and study, I hope you'll do so before you leave church today. We all need practice forgiving, and we all need the chance to explore why we have so much trouble doing so. Marjorie Thompson's little Lenten study on forgiveness isn't long, and it isn't hard, but it's quite insightful, and so I hope you'll join us as we explore why forgiveness is so important.

At the end of his story, there sits Jonah, outside the walls of Nineveh, broiling on his outside from the sun, boiling on his inside from his anger. He's furious that those wicked, repentant, Ninevites have been spared the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, and his anger has cut him off from everyone and everything around him and within him, including his best and deepest self. When we wrap ourselves in heart or resentment or a sense of our own superiority, we unite ourselves with nothing except our own worst selves. Sin divides us, forgiveness makes us one.

The book of Jonah ends with a question, one of only two biblical books that end with a question. In Jonah's case, it's a rhetorical question, because we already know the answer – the answer is yes. Yes, certainly, God should be concerned about Nineveh, including its livestock, if Jonah was concerned for a plant he neither grew nor tended. God's greatness makes Jonah's smallness look even smaller, and the question leaves us wondering if Jonah will remain in the cramped, uncomfortable, isolated spiritual and emotional house he's built for himself.

The question is addressed ostensibly to Jonah, but fundamentally it's addressed to us, all of us who come to church faithfully, pledge generously, and serve diligently. Jonah is one of us – Every Religious Man and Every Religious Woman – he's our stand-in at the throne of grace, and it's not a pretty sight.

The question left hanging at the end of the book of Jonah is whether all our piety, our trying to do the right thing, our efforts to correct the world – if all of that has made us better or made us worse. Has it made us more spiritually generous, or has it made us petty and judgmental? Has it softened our hearts toward the struggles and failings of others, or has it hardened them? Have we become joyous ambassadors of the gospel of Jesus Christ, or the shriveled-up guardians of gotcha religion?

Religion, we're told, like politics, is to be avoided if we want to keep the peace around the Thanksgiving turkey, and we're living right now with the horror of what happens when Islam – or

Christianity or Judaism or any other religion – falls into the wrong hands. The story of Jonah is about religion in the wrong hands, and how much damage bad religion can do.

My old teacher, Paul Holmer, used to say that the answer to bad religion isn't no religion, it's good religion, and what I hope and pray for all of us here at Faith is that it's good religion we find here, that we nurture here, and that we take from here – religion that unites rather than divides, that builds up rather than tears down, and that forgives rather than begrudges. We choose how to be religious, friends, just as we choose how to be parents or partners or friends – and with equally life-shaping consequences. Choose carefully, dear friends, choose carefully.