



October 13-14, 2018
Pastor Mark Toone
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Reckless Love: Jonah
His Petulance
Jonah 4:1-4

Yesterday/Friday I returned from a board meeting of Whitworth University, a Christian college in Spokane. I've been a trustee there since 1992. The highlight of this week was the dedication of a new Theology Center right in the heart of the campus. It is a wonderful symbol of Whitworth's Christ-centered mission which I would say, after this week, is as vibrant as I've ever seen it. Did you know that Chapel Hill sends more students to Whitworth University than any other church outside of Spokane? We have supported Whitworth for decades. And now, if you wander the halls of this brand new complex, you will find this plaque acknowledging our support. Pretty cool!

Last week we found Jonah in wicked Nineveh... preaching the message God sent him to preach. Jonah was the most reluctant prophet in the Bible. In fact, when God called him, Jonah hopped a boat for Tarshish, the exact opposite direction. But after a little persuading, God got Jonah's attention.... and finally, he is in Nineveh.

How many remember the "Seeker-Sensitive" church movement in the 90s? The idea was to eliminate everything that unbelievers might find uncomfortable or offensive in church. So words like "sin" and "evil" and "repentance" and "Hell"...they disappeared. Some churches even took down their crosses because they were too religious.

Well...you cannot find a LESS seeker-sensitive sermon than this one. With no preamble; without any warm, fuzzy, Hallmark Channel stories about his grandchildren ...Jonah lets rip with a hellfire and damnation sermon: "In 40 days, God is going to wipe you out!" Boom! He didn't hand out mugs to newcomers; he didn't shake hands at the door. He just walked through that city preaching the same gloomy message over and over again: "You guys are toast!"

And you'll never believe what happened next! (Jonah 3:5): "And the people of Nineveh believed God!" Who saw THAT coming? The people listened and were cut to the heart. They fasted; they prayed. They wore burlap as a sign of repentance. They even put burlap on their animals: They threw themselves at the mercy of God.

It was the greatest revival in human history. The hearts of the people were changed...so much so that the Lord changed course: 3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. Amazing! God spared the city. The people were saved. All because of Jonah's preaching. Now, you would think that a preacher used THIS effectively by the Lord would be grateful....or blessed... or humbled... or all of the above? Well...not quite. Listen to what comes next. (Jonah 4:1ff.)

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

Nineveh was a great city of Assyria, a bloodthirsty nation that terrorized its enemies. It is an irony of history that today, a bloodthirsty group known as ISIS has terrorized Mosul, Iraq, the modern-day site of ancient Nineveh. In fact...look at this. This is Jonah's tomb, his reputed burial place on an ancient mound in Mosul. This tomb was revered by Islam, Judaism AND Christianity alike. I say "was" because this is what ISIS did to Jonah's tomb. In their crusade to erase history, they blew up this memorial to the man God used to save the people of Nineveh. Jonah preached, the people repented, the mission was accomplished...Huzzah!

And what was Jonah's response to this powerful movement of God's Spirit? "... it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry." Literally, it says, "...it was exceedingly evil to Jonah!" Jonah was ENRAGED that the people of Nineveh repented. And he was enraged that GOD didn't destroy them as said he would.

And now... it suddenly becomes clear. We THOUGHT Jonah ran away because he was afraid of the cruel Ninevites. But noooooo...it wasn't fear that drove Jonah into retreat. It was hatred. Lip-curling contempt. Jonah didn't want to preach to the Ninevites because Jonah despised them; he WANTED God to wipe them out.

He wags his finger at God as he reminds him of an earlier prayer: "Is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?" "I KNEW this was going to happen! I KNEW you were up to no-good good! I KNEW you were going to save these scumbags if I preached to them...and I didn't want any part of it!" "That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish."

And why was Jonah so sure that God would relent? Because he knew God's character. In words that echo throughout the Old Testament, Jonah describes God's nature: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster." But that is NOT the tone he used. If we had an audio recording, THIS is what it would have sounded like: "...I KNEW that you are a gracious God and merciful... pfft....slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love....relenting from disaster... I KNEW it! You are so SOFT!"

THAT is the tone of this prayer. Jonah believed all these things to be true about God. And he loved these qualities ...when they were directed toward him... and toward his people. But the thought that God would show grace or mercy or forgiveness toward the despised Ninevites...this is loathsome to Jonah. He cannot bear it. He cannot believe it! He cannot abide it.

And then he goes into tantrum mode. "Therefore now, oh Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." "Just kill me! Kill me right now! I don't want to live anymore." Isn't this PATHETIC? Don't you feel like you are watching a whiny toddler throwing a tantrum in the mall? Lying on the floor. Kicking and screaming. Embarrassing his parents. "I don't like what you are making me do, Daddy, so I am going to kick and scream my lungs out."

And then...in one of our Heavenly Father's great parenting moments, God asks Jonah a simple question: "Do you do well to be angry?" "Do you REALLY have the right to be outraged, Jonah? If I am the kind of God you described—gracious and merciful and compassionate—is it not my right to treat others that way, too? What right do you have to be angry if I chose to love others besides you?"

Of course Jonah's whole point was, "NO! ...you can NOT love others this way. Especially not others that are so...BAD." This is like the Old Testament version of the Prodigal Son! Jonah is the elder brother...who cannot believe his father has welcomed back his whoring, drunk of a younger brother who wasted his father's inheritance. Not after HE, the elder son, has been so good, so faithful...so deserving. HE deserved his father's love. His worthless brother did not. And that is Jonah's gripe in a nutshell.

And we are cut from the same self-righteous cloth. One of the most spiritually dangerous places we can be is when we start sorting humanity according to those who deserve saving and those who don't. Those who DESERVE God's mercy...and those who do not. And that only happens when we start thinking that we are better than we really are... a lot better than some...and that God grades on a curve.

Take ISIS. We hate those guys. And with reason. We hate their brutality. We hate that they crush dissent and brutalize their opposition, especially our Christian brothers and sisters. When we hear that a drone strike has wiped out a bunch of them... honestly... there's a part of us...a part of ME...that is glad. Because they have it coming to them. And the thought that God might love them...might want to save them... that is unimaginable to us. They do not deserve it! Not those people.

But we don't have to look across the world to find people that make our lip curl. I have never seen our nation as divided as we are now...and I'll confess, I find myself drawn into that battle. I have my own strong views...and I am more and more disgusted by those on "the other side." It is easy for me to attribute to them evil and ill will. Maybe you have felt the same thing. Who are "those" people for you? Who are the ones whose behaviors or beliefs you find irredeemable? Who make YOUR lip curl? Fill in the blank. Those Republicans. Those Democrats. Those MSNBC-watchers. Those Fox-watchers. Kavanaugh. Pelosi. Who are YOUR irredeemables?

Or maybe it is more personal for you. Maybe it is the husband who abandoned you. Or the wife who betrayed you. Or the man who abused you. Or the boss who humiliated you. Or the so-called friend who scandalized you. Every one of us has "those" people on the "other side" ...people whom we find deplorable...people whom we cannot imagine God wanting to save...and even if he DID want to save them, we'd rather he did not.

Do you know what that means...when we begin to separate those who DESERVE God's mercy from those who do not? Do you know what that means? It means...we've forgotten how lost WE were before God found us...and saved us.

A woman named Della Erstad and her family were on a camping trip in our state recently. Most of the family left camp to go on a hike. Della remained behind to prepare dinner, along with her five-year-old son. Later, when the hikers returned, Della was horrified to realize...she didn't know where her boy was. The entire group fanned out through the woods, shouting his name. No luck. They went down to the lake, bracing themselves for the worst possible discovery. But they found nothing.

They returned to the camp site, continuing to scream the boy's name. Suddenly, they heard a faint cry. They moved toward the sound, screaming all the louder. Again, a child's cry...and they realized it was coming from the outhouse near the camp. They ran to the outhouse, threw open the door, and looked down. And there was the boy, standing up to his armpits in excrement, hands above his head, crying, "Mommy...mommy!"

When we get disgusted or suspicious or angry at the idea that God would save unworthy people, it means we have forgotten something basic to our salvation: We were unworthy, too. We were that kid! You were that kid! Lost in your wanderings, immersed in the filth of your own sin, hopelessly lifting up your arms, begging to be saved. That's what you were...and maybe you believe that. Maybe you look at your life and say, "Yep...I was up to my arms in poop."

Or MAYBE you say what a lot of suburban folks say: "...but at least I wasn't as bad as THAT guy! At least I'm not as bad as THOSE people. My sins are nicer than theirs." Which shows how little we understand about the destructive power of sin. Pastor Larry recently illustrated this by asking if we'd eat a brownie that had only a TEENSY bit of arsenic in it? Of course not! Why? Because it's poison; even a little poison is deadly.

The Bible says that we are all, by nature, poisoned with sin. Sin is not a thing we do; sin is a spiritual infection that idolizes the self. Self-centeredness. Self-righteousness. Self-indulgence. This is the liturgy of sin. Our suburbanite sin may not be as spectacular as terrorism or as obvious as bare-knuckled politics. But every one of us has at least a little arsenic in our souls. Every one of us is like that little kid. Just as lost. Just as wretched. Just as desperate. Oh, there might be others who are deeper in that poop hole than we are. But really, one turd more or less doesn't make much difference, does it. We were ALL in the same crappy state of sin and we all need rescue.

Let me finish the story. They scrambled around, looking for some way to pull the little guy out of that disgusting hole. Finally, in desperation, his mom said, "Forget it! Just lower me down!" So they held Della by her ankles...and lowered her down into that pit. You know what outhouse holes are like. Narrow...caked in filth. But it didn't matter. She was lowered right through that hole...right through that gunk...until she reached her baby, grabbed him in her arms and pulled him to safety.

Does this sound like any savior you know? Jesus found US in our spiritual latrine! The pure Son of God loved us so much that he was lowered down into our filth—he was covered with our filth...our sin—so that he might lift us to purity and new life.

But we forget that. We who have been saved by Jesus... sometimes look at others ...the "unworthies" of this world... the same way that Jonah looked at the Ninevites. We are superior, judgmental and very selfish of God's mercy. "Those" wretched people with their obvious sins certainly NEED saving...but they don't deserve saving. We DON'T love "those" lost people. And we are a little disgusted with God when he loves disgusting people. But he does. Our gracious, merciful, steadfast God loves "those" people...as much as he loved us.

In this season...this roiling, ugly political season...Jonah has reminded me of my own self-righteousness... my love-lessness towards certain others. And when I discover my lip curling...I am praying a prayer of repentance every time. Perhaps you will join me.