

Sermon for January 22, 2012

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Embracing Nineveh

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I can never read the Book of Jonah without recalling the summer I did a seminary internship on the island of Jamaica. I arrived in Kingston believing I was going to spend the summer working at a Children's Home. Later that day I learned that was not going to be the case. Rather than working in a children's home, I would be living in a rural community in the mountain, assisting a pastor who had a four-point charge with the United Church of Jamaica and Grand Cayman.

Because I had not planned to work with churches I had not brought any sermon preparation resources with me. Having just done a study of the book of Jonah the previous semester, I prepared a sermon about responding to God's call. Each Sunday I delivered this sermon to the congregation that I was assigned to.

It is what followed one of those sermons that I will never forget. Following the service of worship an individual from the congregation approached me with a broad smile. He then made a word-play on my last name saying that I was as pretty as a pancake. That is one of the most interesting responses I have ever received to my preaching.

I am still intrigued by the Book of Jonah, which is so unique in the biblical canon that scholars can't agree on its genre. Is it an allegory? A fable? A folktale? An historical account? A parable? Or a short story? Although most scholars agree that the story of Jonah is fictional, I believe that the character of Jonah reflects many real human emotions.

One of the characteristics of Jonah that I relate to is his unwillingness to do something that he believes will benefit his enemies. As you will recall from the Children's Moment, Jonah is forced by God to deliver a call to repentance to the people of Nineveh. At the end of the story Jonah becomes angry and explains that he didn't want to go to Nineveh because he knows that God is merciful, gracious, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. (4:2) In other words, Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh to make God's proclamation because he didn't want the people of that city to be recipients of God's grace. That is how much he hated his enemies.

If you look up the word “enemy” in the dictionary you find that it is defined as one who is antagonistic to another. Especially, one seeking to injure, overthrow, or confound an opponent.

I contend that in each of our lives there are, or have been, people who have been antagonistic towards us. In some cases these individuals may have sought to cause physical harm. In other cases they may have caused emotional or psychological harm. These individuals may be found in our families, our schools, our neighborhoods, our places of work, and even in our church.

You may think that “enemy” is too strong a word to describe such individuals. In which case I invite you to consider reflecting on the people you have been in tension with. Or, the people you strongly disagree with. I have been a pastor for too many years, to not know that people are in tension with each other.

In addition to the people we have known personally, we can identify individuals and groups who have been antagonistic towards society, or against our nation. For a number of years the daily news has included reports about terrorists who are attacking people throughout the world. Terrorists are identified as enemies.

There is also a growing divide in our nation between political parties and those who are labeled “conservative,” versus those who are labeled “liberal.” Politicians and pundits use the language of “enemies” when talking about these differences.

Like Jonah, it is not uncommon for us to have feelings of animosity towards those who are antagonistic towards us. In some cases, we may even long for revenge. If nothing else, we wish to avoid contact with these individuals at all costs. And like Jonah, we can’t imagine our enemies receiving the grace of God.

Despite Jonah’s protests, God pushes him towards Nineveh. It is this part of the story that provides a powerful model for dealing with enemies...go to them. While I know that this is not always possible, and in some cases too dangerous, there are other opportunities that arise in which we might be led to enter into conversation with our enemies...or those we perceive to be our enemies.

A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to view the documentary film, “Refusing to be Enemies.” Some of you were at the same showing. Others may have seen the film at another time. The film shares the story of six Jewish and six Arab women from the Ann Arbor area. For generations Jews and Arabs have perceived each other to be the enemy. Some of the women in the group are

American born, while others are immigrants. One of the women is a Holocaust survivor and another is a survivor of the bombing of her Palestinian home town.

With the help of a gifted facilitator these 12 women came together to dialogue with each other. Over the course of several months their fear and hatred began to dissolve as they got to know one another better. Through these conversations these women found many commonalities. They found that those who are perceived as being the oppressors may also have their own experiences of being oppressed.

The 12 women in the film call their group “*Zeitouna*” which is an Arab word for olive tree. They have used the film as a springboard to help others who wish to enter into such dialogues. On the *Zeitouna* website they share that the word dialogue comes from the Greek words, *dia* and *logos*, translated as “through meaning.” The outcome of dialogue is a stream of meaning flowing through a group that enables members to create new understandings and shared meaning.

The women of *Zeitouna* have created a non-profit organization called Refusing to be Enemies. The purpose of this organization is to empower people to make peace a reality in their live and communities through education and dialogue. They believe that dialogue leads to a fuller, more integrated picture of reality and that it opens people to all perspectives. Dialogue is not about winning, but about collaboration and synthesis of viewpoints. It is not driven by a necessary outcome. And, it can be a basis for a culture of cooperation and shared leadership.

One of the most powerful concepts that arose out of this documentary is this: Don’t try to win the argument. In other words, there will always be different ways of perceiving the same situations. Rather than feeling the need to win, take the time to listen and understand the other person’s viewpoint.

As the title of this film, *Refusing to be Enemies*, suggest, there is a choice connected with enemies. The 12 women of *Zeitouna* have made the choice to stop being enemies. These women make it clear that they cannot bring peace to the Middle East, but that they can make a difference in their own lives. The difference they make in their lives may then blossom out to make a difference in the lives of others.

As we reflect on the people who we are in tension with, we can ask ourselves if there are ways in which we can enter into dialogue with them. When such dialogue occurs, it is often discovered that the individual who has been antagonistic towards us, is acting out of his or her own brokenness and fear. We may also discover that we share a number of commonalities.

The steps we take in this process may be small ones. A few weeks ago I heard this example: A Midland city official shared that the city office gets several calls from people complaining that their neighbors don't shovel their side walks. The city official suggested that rather than call the city to complain, these concerned citizens could go to their neighbor to find out if they can be of assistance. There may be a reason why they are not keeping their sidewalk clean.

Unlike the women of *Zeitouna*, Jonah has no interest in entering into dialogue with his enemies. Jonah's story ends with him being consumed with anger over the realization that his enemies have received God's grace. With overwhelming hatred, Jonah proclaims that he would rather be dead than see his enemies saved.

It is interesting that this strange folk tale takes place in the city that is now known as Mosul, Iraq. A place that many in our nation considered home to enemies.

This story challenges us with a choice. We can choose to be like Jonah who wished to deny God's grace to others. Or, we can follow the example of the women of *Zeitouna*, who have found a way to build a bridge of grace with those who they perceived to be enemies.