

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Epiphany IIIb

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A Love Bigger Than The Whale

Texts: Jonah 3:1-5, Mark 1:14-20

I just love the Jonah story! Here's this guy, portrayed so humanly, who, out of nowhere, receives this summons from God to be a prophet to the people of Nineveh. Nineveh was this way (left). So Jonah goes *that* way (right) – to the port of Joppa, buys ticket to Tarshish, intent on sailing far away from Nineveh and God.

After a horrendous storm, a hotel suite in a whale's stomach and, well, elevated out of the whale's mouth, Jonah finally realizes that God means business. So off Jonah goes to Nineveh and preaches prophetic judgment – no doubt still quite skeptical about the whole darn project.

But, to his wide-open-mouth surprise, Nineveh repents! And what is even more surprising, God repents! God changes her mind and decides not to destroy Nineveh. Which, in turn, angers Jonah – because, after all his grief, he wanted to see the fireworks!

What is the point of this? What has it to do with our lives today? Well, consider this.

The book of Jonah, a mere four tiny chapters, was included in the Hebrew canon, the Hebrew Bible we used to call the Old Testament, because it, along with the books of Ruth and Esther, provided a counterweight, a balance, to the very tribal books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah demanded that in rebuilding Jerusalem all intermarriages had to end. Every Jew is to marry a Jew. Such a tribal values emphasis implies that the other nations were inferior or of no value.

But, in the story of Jonah, God is very interested in the welfare of the non-Jewish people of Nineveh. Yeah, it is couched in God's sometimes hot-tempered way, but the closing words of the book are the point to the Jewish reader – especially to their children:

Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left?

The story is teaching that God is a universal God not a tribal one –that Jews need to spread their religion beyond their borders.

I had a distant uncle in Melbourne, Australia who was an Orthodox Jew and who never responded to my letters. I guess the tribal view prevailed. I discovered I had another distant uncle in Chicago, not Orthodox – and he always made sure I had somewhere to go on Thanksgiving. Two views of their faith that affected their outreach and how they viewed the wider world.

So Jonah is not so strange after all. He's right up to date. There are all kinds of orthodox-type Christians around whose views on sexuality and other justice issues close their circle to exclude others – whether straight or gay. Yet we have been given a grace and a responsibility, a gift and an opportunity, to enlarge the circle beyond any orthodox narrowness -a circle that includes all who hear and respond to God's life-giving Word.

If we want this church to grow then we all need to hear God's message to Jonah, the message of an ever-widening circle.

In the Gospel reading, it is not Jonah but Jesus who has much the same message: God is near in new ways, repent and trust this good news. The difference is that Jesus doesn't run from the challenge. No whale is needed in the plot. And whereas a city of 120,000 repents at Jonah's words, only Peter, Andrew and the Zebedee boys, James and John, join Jesus' circle.

It is true that Jesus had the kind of courage Jonah initially was lacking. But the numbers are far less impressive. Perhaps this means that we, in our number-crunching world, need to hear a different word. Forget the numbers and concentrate on the joy of the message we have to share.

And what is that message? To see God in new ways. To have an epiphany of hearing about God in fresh new ways – free from narrow minds and interpretations and, yes, to repent!

But before I lose you, lend me your ears a little while longer. The word "repent" has been ruined by meanings that would have us deny who we are. Some of us have lost years believing the lies and many on our streets only hear religions with closed circles shutting them out with calls to moralistic repentance.

But "repent" means to see things in a whole new light, that widens the circle of God's love. Repent means to change one's mind deeply and with the joy of self-discovery. God repented from destroying Nineveh. That means God changed her mind. Repentance is not moralistic conversion but seeing life anew!

Our invitation to repent is nothing less than to claim your wholeness – not to suppress it. Our call to repent is to think of God and religion in a whole new way – of embracing all into Christ’s circle and seeing religion as a passion for forgiving and a struggle for justice for all who have been forced to live less than their full humanity.

And how is this done? How is this kind of evangelism accomplished? Not like Jonah standing on a corner calling on all San Francisco to repent. That would be lost in the pain such ignorance and prejudice has produced already.

So how is our reaching out to building this church up accomplished? By building relationships with a few people, one or two at a time. Just like Jesus, invite people who just might turn out to be a Peter or Andrea, a Johanna or James.

And what do we invite them to? To church? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Rather invite them into your life by listening to them. And by listening to their story, you will naturally discover, by the gracious gift of God’s Spirit in you, an opportunity to tell them a little of your story. And God often just appears – without even the word said. True epiphany.

We want people to change their minds about religion and God by their being heard and therefore loved as fellow children of God. And we do have a story to tell as a church – that you belong here because you are one of us and we are one with you. You have been created by God as you are, with your gifts and deficits, like us all.

But above all, we invite you to claim your wholeness as a sexual person just as God lovingly created you gay, lesbian, straight or whatever. That’s the kind of repentance we preach – seeing God and God’s peoples in synagogues, temples, churches and mosques in a fresh new way, as part of the great wide circle of love and healing. As the Gospel read, “God has come near to you; repent and believe this good news.”

Notice: “good news.”

Amen

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