

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"God loves the people we hate"

Scripture: Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10, 4:1-11

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November 9, 2020

Songs/Hymns: Eternal Father, strong to save 325, O God, Our Help in Ages Past 330 (1-3,6), The National Anthem: "O Canada" 833, Lord, I want to be a Christian 571, Amazing Grace (My chains are gone) (Tomlin)
Remembrance Sunday

At the heart of the Christian faith
are two essential commands:
Love God. Love you neighbor.

When it comes loving our neighbor
I think that most of us feel fairly proficient.
Most of us make pretty decent neighbors.

We keep an eye on next door
when they go on holidays.
We share the abundance of our garden
with the lady across the street.

We lend tools,
We drop off misdirected mail,
We make room for these people in our lives.

Of course, it is easy to love your neighbors
When you choose them.

Now I know you're thinking "I didn't choose my neighbors."
Well you didn't choose those exact neighbors
But it is certain that when you decided to buy property,
You gave good considered to the location.

You looked at upscale urban or residential areas:
Areas not known for crime,
Neighborhoods considered good and safe.

As to those properties near the prison,
Around the block from the needle-exchange,
Or adjacent to the new cannabis retailer...

Your realtor knew better than to suggest those spots.

When you finally made your choice
and you moved into the new location,
the people you started meeting seemed a lot like you.

Same sorts of occupations, same sort of demographics.

Most of us have chosen our geographic neighbors.
And so it's not all that difficult to love them.
But is that all that our faith demands of us?

Well not according to Jesus.
According to Jesus we are to:
"love [our] *enemies*
and pray for those who *persecute [us]*,

that [we] may be children of [our] Father in heaven"ⁱ

He adds that are no rewards for simply loving our friends.
Pretty much everyone does that.

But don't think that it is Jesus
Just putting a new spin on Old Testament religion.
These purposes were clear from the beginning.

Abraham's descendants (natural or spiritual)
Are meant to bless the entire world
Not just their own friends.ⁱⁱ

We are reminded of this in today's story.
The book of Jonah is about God's mercy
Extending across neighborhoods and nations.

*[Scholar and preacher Elizabeth Achtemeier
Notes that "anyone who still holds the old stereotypical opinion
That the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and judgmental,
In contrast to the God of the New,
who is loving and merciful,
Should carefully read the book of Jonah"ⁱⁱⁱ]*

Now for those who attended Sunday School as a child
The book of Jonah is largely remembered
As a story about a man and a whale.

But if you listened carefully today
I think you will agree that this is
probably the least challenging element of the story.

This is a lesson about loving our enemies.
It is meant to provoke us
And force us to reconsider our attitudes and behaviors.

But in order to truly enter this story
we all need some important background.

The information you need is this:
Of all the enemies of Israel,
Nineveh stands with the worst of them.

It was the equivalent of Berlin
For the British during the Blitz.

Elsewhere the Bible remembers Nineveh as:
“the symbol of overwhelming and ruthless power of empire...
Nahum depicts it as a “city of blood”
and of “endless cruelty”.^{iv}

During the time of King Hezekiah,
leader the southern kingdom of Judah,
the Assyrian King Sennacherib
sieged and captured the town of Lachish.

This event was commemorated on reliefs
installed in Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh.

Now on display in the British Museum,
The reliefs depict Judean “defenders...
being thrown over the ramparts,
[being] impaled, having their throats cut
and asking for mercy.”^v

These are the kind of neighbors
That no-one wants to have!

Knowing this background helps us understand why,
When God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it,
Jonah takes runs in the opposite direction

So is Jonah is concerned
About his personal safety?

[Remember that these people had no problem impaling foreigners,
And God made no promise of a security detail...]

The Bible tells us that Jonah is on the run,
not out of concern for his own wellbeing
Jonah's greatest fear is that Nineveh will repent
And that God will show mercy.

In the last chapter Jonah divulges this secret.
He says to God: "I knew it!"
"I knew it!"

"I knew you were sheer grace and mercy,
not easily angered, rich in love,

and ready at the drop of a hat
to turn your plans of punishment
into a program of forgiveness!"^{vi}

Jonah doesn't want reconciliation,
Jonah doesn't want forgiveness.
And so when God sends Jonah to Nineveh,
Jonah goes the other way.

Most of us are familiar this plan to escape God's calling
And how this all goes sideways.

Jonah charters a boat but ends up being thrown overboard.
Jonah is swallowed by a fish
and spends three days and three nights in its belly.

God it seems, is truly a God of second chances.
When Jonah is spit up, on the beach
The old order is repeated.

God calls to Jonah again
And sends him off to preach in Nineveh.

This time Jonah begrudgingly obeys.
He books a trip to Nineveh, heads to the city center
And proclaims God's message
in what is probably the shortest sermon ever:

"In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed."

Now it doesn't sound that persuasive
But God's word hits home.
The wicked, violent people of Nineveh repent.

The Bible tells us:

“The people of Nineveh listened, and trusted God.
They proclaimed a citywide fast
and dressed in burlap to show their repentance.

Everyone did it—rich and poor,
famous and obscure, leaders and followers...

[And when] God saw what they had done,
that they had turned away from their evil lives.
He did change his mind about them.

What he said he would do to them he didn't do.”^{vii}

This gets Jonah, the reluctant preacher, steaming.
His worst fears have been realised.
God has forgiven the hated Ninevites.

And so, Jonah sets up camp outside the city and sulks.

God sees his pouting prophet.
And tries to help Jonah understand God's compassion.
Instead of sending a whale, God sends a plant:
a plant that provides shade,
And then withers and dies.

God points out that if Jonah can appreciate a plant
That he has only enjoyed for a day,
Then surely, he must understand God's concern for Nineveh,
Both its people and animals.

God makes the point,
But we aren't told how Jonah responds.

It isn't clear whether God's reluctant servant
Will ever embrace God's character
And show the same compassion and love.

How about us?
It is easy to love those neighbors we choose
But it is not as easy to love the unlovely.
And it is really hard to love our enemies.

And yet this calling is inescapable.
You see compassion is part of God's character.
And God has chosen us to be the instruments through which
God will bless the entire world, not just our own friends.

This year we are celebrating the 75th anniversary
Of the Second World War.

When we think that war,
we often think of atrocities
Committed by the Nazis.

And yet could it be that even a Nazi
Could showcase that compassion of God
We were hearing about today?

Listen to this story, a story written by Jinny McCormick
That I found in *War History Online*:

“In the cold skies over far northern Germany,
planes were battling it out
in temperatures below [minus 60 celcius].

On the ground, near Bremen,
an accomplished pilot with 22 kills,
Franz Stigler, was refueling his plane,
a Messerschmitt Bf 109 G-6,
which was at risk of overheating
because of a bullet in its radiator.

Stigler was watching the air,
and he saw a tattered US bomber
so beaten up it could barely fly.

The plane, piloted by Charles Brown of West Virginia,
had sustained the damage to the aircraft’s nose,
and with two engines disabled it was slowing down.

Brown lost his position in the formation
and had been left behind to endure enemy fire...

Electrical systems were failing.
His weapons had jammed,
he’d lost part of the nose and an elevator,
and most of his crew were now injured.

Brown himself suffered a wound in his right shoulder.
The pain had to be endured
because the morphine on board had frozen.

There could be no calling for help,
as the radio has been destroyed.

Stigler took off from below and flew to Brown's plane.

The exterior damage to the aircraft
allowed him to see inside to the suffering of the crew.

Stigler was a fighter pilot with integrity.
As a young pilot, a commanding officer had told him,
"You are fighter pilots first, last, always.

If I ever hear of any of you
shooting at someone in a parachute,
I'll shoot you myself."

Stigler tried to direct them to a German airfield,
hoping that they would land and surrender.

Brown and his crew did not understand and fly on.
He tried to guide them to neutral territory in Sweden,
but again, they didn't understand.

Stigler moved to a formation on Brown's port side wing
to protect him from further German fire...

The brave and compassionate Stigler remained on the bomber's wing
all the way to the coast
to get the bomber safely over open water.

Now that the bomber was safe,
Stigler looks into the bomber's cabin,
saluted Brown and his crew,
and flew back into German airspace.

Brown was able to make it back to England
where he reported the incident to his officers.
He was told not to repeat the story.

The officers seemed to want to prevent their men
from having positive feelings about enemy pilots.

Brown later said, "Someone decided you can't be human
and be flying in a German cockpit."

Stigler kept his mouth shut too.
His act of bravery and compassion
would have put him at risk of execution.

Many years later, in 1986, Brown began a search for Stigler.
He finally found him in 1990, living in Canada.
The two formed a friendship that lasted until their deaths,
both in 2008.^{viii}

God calls us to love our enemies.
It is only by loving that enemy
that he or she can become a friend.

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 5:44-45 NIV

ⁱⁱ See Genesis 12:3

iii Elizabeth Achtemeier "Jonah 3:1-5, 10" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Old Testament and Acts*, 484

iv Elizabeth Achtemeier "Jonah 3:1-5, 10" *The Lectionary Commentary: The Old Testament and Acts* 485

v "Siege of Lachish" *Wikipedia*

vi Jonah 4:2 MSG

vii Jonah 3:5, 10 MSG

viii Jinny McCormick "Stories Of Humanity And Compassion From Throughout The Second World War" *War History Online*
October 25, 2017 <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-ii/wwii-3-stories-of-humanity-and-compassion-m.html>