

When We Keep God's Love to Ourselves E3060122
Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:5 and Mark 1:14-20
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 22 January, 2006

In Michigan, we did what was often called a "Michigan Left." That's where you turn right in order to turn left onto a super road like Woodward or Telegraph. It's where you turn west, in order to go east. Jonah made a "Michigan Left."

God gave Jonah a command. "Go tell those people in Nineveh to repent." Nineveh was East. Jonah went West. He went to the port of Joppa and boarded a ship bound for Tarshish. That's like going out to play when mom has told you to go clean your room. It's analogous to jumping an airplane to Bora Bora when God has told you to go to Columbia, S.C. to lobby against flying the Confederate battle flag on the state Capital grounds. Tarshish was at the edge of the world known to middle easterners. Jonah disobeyed God.

Last week, we heard about how the young boy Samuel listened and heard God's word. Jonah listened and heard God's word, but, he didn't like what he heard! He blatantly disobeyed God. Not only did Jonah think he could escape his duty by running away, he thought he could escape God by running away. Silly man. Jonah found out that God is everywhere: in Israel, in Nineveh, on a boat in the Mediterranean, and in the belly of a large fish.

We cannot run away from God, so stop trying. Stop trying to run away from God by burying yourself in work or by telling yourself whatever you do about God's not caring about you. God is all around and God is love, and God loves you and wants you for God's very own.

What was the word Jonah heard from God? That he was to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Israel's enemy: Assyria. Nineveh is just a short boat ride away from present-day Baghdad. Which of you would not jump on an airplane to Bora Bora if you heard God tell you to go to Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi to tell him that God loves him?

What was the word that Jonah was supposed to speak to the Ninevites? He was to tell them that God would destroy their city because of their wickedness. The prophet Nahum said that Nineveh was a "City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, [and] full of booty"¹ It was a violent city, living by "the crack of whip and rumble of wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! It was a city of "horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, and piles of . . . dead bodies." It was to this city that Jonah was to preach.

Finally, Jonah did go and did preach. Jonah was *successful*. This reluctant prophet was probably the most successful preacher of all time. Immediately, the story goes, the king ordered his people to repent of their wickedness. All the residents, even the animals, showed their repentance by putting on sackcloth and ashes.

What was Jonah's problem? Why did he go west when he was supposed to go east? He confessed it, right after the Ninevites repented: "I fled to Tarshish at the beginning, for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing."² Wow! What a confession of faith! Isn't that the kind of God you want to know? "Gracious," "merciful," "patient," "abounding in steadfast love." What's more, God will change God's mind. Instead of destroying the city of Nineveh like God said, God

¹Nahum 3:1; The definition of booty is "Plunder taken from an enemy in time of war."

²Jonah 4:2

spared it because the people quickly recognized God's sovereignty.

Jonah became depressed by his success. I guess he wanted to keep God's love to himself. He didn't want to share any of it with his enemies. The result was that he sat down and sulked. He was experiencing a full blown depression.

There are four important lessons to be gleaned from this colorful story of just forty-eight verses. 1) God demands obedience. We cannot escape God, and we cannot escape our duty to God. Our duty is to preach the Gospel. It is to share the good news of God's love with all people.

2) God demands humility. The Ninevites humbly repented and changed their ways, recognizing God's sovereignty and authority. All God is asking for is a little respect! There is something greater than the individual. Remember that God is God and we are human.

3) We cannot keep God's love to ourselves. When we keep God's love to ourselves, we get sick: sick to our stomachs like the fish that vomited up Jonah; sick like the depression Jonah suffered when his enemies accepted God's word and repented and changed their ways. This is a story about evangelism: sharing God's good news. With whom have you shared God's love lately? Whom have you invited to church? To whose problems have you listened? To whom have you shown some extra Christian care and attention lately? With whom have you talked following worship?

4) God is a wonderful loving and forgiving God. Isn't it wonderful to know this God? This God is "gracious, merciful, patient, abounding in steadfast love." It is wonderful to share this God.