

February 5, 2006
Jonah 4:1-11, Mark 1:29-39
Dr. Lewis Galloway

"Running from the Truth"

It is easy to ignore things we don't want to hear. Over the years I have discovered that my life could have been a whole lot easier if I had only listened to advice from others. Some things we have to learn the hard way. We tend to run from the truth when the truth demands something of us. My mother always taught us to be kind. She told us that whenever we said something unkind or hurtful to another person, we not only hurt the other person but we hurt ourselves. At times, frustration or anger have made me say things that I later regretted. No matter what we know to be true, sometimes we are stubborn and want to do things our own way.

Jonah doesn't want God or anybody else telling him what to do. He is a prophet who runs from the truth. He runs from the truth of God. When God called Jonah to go to the city of Nineveh, he ran as far as he could go in the opposite direction. God did not give up on Jonah. God delivered Jonah from the belly of a giant fish and called him a second time to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah went, but he still didn't want to go. It is only at the end of the story that we discover the full reason why Jonah ran from God. It wasn't because Jonah was afraid. He wasn't afraid of the dangers of the journey, being laughed out of town or getting thrown into jail. He didn't want God to forgive them. Jonah says, "This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." He knows what God is like and he doesn't like it one bit.

We hear in Jonah's description of God's character the echo of the words spoken in Exodus, Numbers, Nehemiah, Psalms, Proverbs, Micah and Hosea. (*Interpretation Commentary: Hosea-Micah*, James Limburg, p.154). Jonah's theology is not on the fringes of the faith; his words about God come from the very core of Israel's faith about the nature of God. To grasp how difficult it is for Jonah to accept what he knows to be true about God, we need to recall who the people of Nineveh are. They are Assyrians. Several generations after Jonah, the Assyrians will crush the northern kingdom of Israel and carry the people off into exile. They are the enemy. God's care and mercy extend even to the enemies of Israel.

Jonah wants to ignore God because he wants God to share his prejudices, care only for the people he cares about and show mercy only to those he thinks deserve it. Jonah prefers for God to act like a tribal deity, who shows preferential treatment to Jonah and to Jonah's people. Jonah wants nothing to do with the God who created the heavens and the earth and cares for everything in it. He is not interested in hearing what God said to his ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, when God called them not only to receive a blessing but also to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. He is not interested in the God who causes sunshine and rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. He wants God to be on his

side. When asked if God were on the side of the Union in the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln remarked, "Sir my concern is not whether God is on our side. My great concern is to be on God's side." God shatters our illusions and the idols of our own making. God constantly challenges our thinking and calls us grow in our understanding of the boundless love of God.

The Irish potato famine began in 1845 with the failure of the potato crop. The famine was severe because the blight continued for several years and the potato was the core of the Irish diet. Over five years, the population of Ireland dropped from over eight million to a little over six million. Of this two million decrease, at least one million is attributed to death by starvation and disease. While there were people who worked to relieve the suffering, there was a prevailing attitude among the English that the terrible famine was the result of God's judgment against an idolatrous nation. The home secretary, Sir James Graham, wrote to Prime Minister Robert Peel, "It is awful to observe how the Almighty humbles the pride of Nations. The Sword, the Pestilence and Famine are the instruments of his displeasure: the cankerworm and the locust are his armies, he gives the word ... and we see a Nation prostrate, stretching out its Hands for Bread. These are solemn warnings, and they fill me with reverence; they proclaim with a voice not to be mistaken, that doubtless here is a God who judges the Earth" (Quoted in *The Victorians* by A.N. Wilson, p. 76).

The spectacle of millions of starving men, women and children may have led these political leaders and church members to theologize about the judgment of God; but, when combined with a deep prejudice against the Irish, the famine did not lead these leaders to any great acts of compassion. Can we not trace, both in the affairs of nations and in the human heart, a tendency to seek mercy, compassion and understanding for ourselves and judgment and punishment for our enemies? Have we not seen by painful example how the church of Jesus Christ has, through the centuries, sanctioned crusades, inquisitions, pogroms, racial oppression, holocaust, prejudice and hatred? When we demean and dehumanize a racial group, a nation, a social class, a religious faith, a political party or persons of different sexual orientation by labeling that group or those individuals with pejorative names and therefore outside the circle of God's compassion, we are not being true to the God whose mercy knows no bounds.

Jonah felt no empathy for the people of Nineveh. James Limburg notes that Jonah praises God for saving him; but he burns with a white-hot anger for saving the people of Nineveh. He does not want grace extended to the Assyrians. He does not want God to be soft on other people's sin. (*Interpretation Commentary: Hosea - Micah*, p.154). When the people repent and God forgives them, Jonah is furious. He is so angry he wants to die. God chides Jonah for feeling empathy for the bush that springs up, provides him shade and then is destroyed by a worm. Yet, Jonah feels no sympathy for the people and animals that God has made. If Jonah can feel compassion for a bush, then how much more compassion must God feel for all people and creatures of Nineveh who need God's help.

Jesus begins his ministry proclaiming the mercy and compassion of God. In the home of Simon Peter, Jesus heals Peter's sick mother-in-law. When the people see the power of God in Jesus to heal, they begin to bring to Jesus all who are sick and troubled. He heals them. In the morning, he tells the disciples that it is time to go to the neighboring towns to

proclaim the message of God's kingdom. His first healing that day is in a familiar home with people he knows. Then, he goes out to offer the same healing grace, in unfamiliar towns, to people he does not know. The story of the gospel is the movement of Jesus in an ever-widening circle, extending the grace of God even to a Samaritan woman and a Roman Centurion. When the Book of Acts takes up the story, we see the grace of God moving from the Jewish world centered in Jerusalem to the gentile world centered in Rome. Everywhere, this God is "a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing."

Everywhere the church goes with the message of God's boundless love, there is always some new Jonah who wants to put the brakes on God's love. In his parables, Jesus warns us about the people who think like Jonah. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the older brother can't stand the fact that his wasteful brother is getting something he doesn't deserve; in the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the king forgives his servant a great debt but this same servant refuses to forgive the small debt of his fellow servant; in the Parable of the Labors in the Vineyard, those who have worked all day are furious to discover that the owner of the vineyard gives a full day's wage to those who worked only a few hours. Jesus encounters these Jonahs in his own ministry when the scribes, Sadducees and the Pharisees oppose his teaching and begin to plot his death. At every turn, when the church moves into the larger world, there are always some who think the church should keep a tight lid on the gospel and question the footloose ways in which the Spirit acts through the apostles to bring the gospel to the world.

Unless we want to spend our lives sitting under a bush in the hot sun, fussing and fuming about all the things we don't like, maybe we need to ask ourselves if we are running from some truth that God has to teach us. Perhaps we are struggling to accept people whose faith and practices are different from our own. Maybe there is someone we think is beyond the power of God's redemptive love. Maybe we find ourselves unable to forgive someone who has hurt us. There may be groups whose actions, thoughts and behavior we reject and cannot understand and we want to ignore them.

In his book, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, Dr. Richard Mouw of Fuller Seminary writes that, as the church, we are called to a special vocation of practicing civility. Civility means holding with deep conviction our own beliefs while respecting and honoring those whose beliefs are different from our own. He believes that civility depends upon an empathetic spirit, a genuine curiosity and a willingness to learn. Jonah was not empathetic, curious or willing to learn. What Jonah was unable to do, Jesus did perfectly. Like Jesus, we need to put ourselves in another person's situation and discover the power of empathy to change our stony hearts. Rather than telling someone else what to do, first we need to listen to that person. We need to see that person as someone who is beloved of God and as someone for whom Christ died.

Unless we want to run from the truth of God, we need to face those deep places in our soul where we are most troubled, afraid or resistant to God. In her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, author Anne Lamont talks about the difficult time she had forgiving her mother. Lamont describes herself as the angriest daughter on earth. She knew that God had forgiven her and that God called her to forgive her mother. Even after her mother

died, it was a long time before she was able to do it. She bore the wounds and scars of her traumatic childhood. Her pastor, Veronica, preached a sermon about being still and listening to God. She took Veronica's words to heart and began to see her mother through "quiet eyes." Every time she had hard thoughts about her mother, she would say to herself, "Those [thoughts] are not the truth." Slowly, God's grace began to change her heart. She studied a picture of her mother at sixty and began to see her as someone more than the woman who had caused her pain. Lamont saw her mother as a strong, vigorous and even beautiful woman. Even though all the shadows that covered her mother's life did not lift, Lamont saw a light in her and she was able to honor the light. Two years after her mother's death, Lamont was finally able to gather her family together and scatter her mother's ashes at the top of a hill where "the wind caught her and whooshed her away." She was able to forgive. Lamont stopped running from the hard truth she had to learn about the boundless love of God.

Maybe it is time that we, too, stopped running from God.