

October 28, 2018

TEXT: Jonah 3:10–4:11

TITLE: Big Themes, Little Books: Praying for Nineveh

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Sermons are theological ideas stitched together carefully, like a fine shirt or linen blouse. Yesterday morning the tailoring of my sermon was done by 9:00. And then literally all hell broke loose. The garment I'd prepared was shredded, ripped into pieces by one deranged gunman's violent and anti-Semitic acts in a synagogue close by. Eventually I found time to re-read my earlier sermon with its focus on the final verses from the little book of Jonah. It was amazing to me how a few hours had drastically changed my perspective on Jonah—for now I too was angry with God; I too was sulking and frustrated just like Jonah. But as I quietly read what I'd written yesterday morning, some of the fabric—some of the words still rang true.

Here are the actual opening words from my initial sermon draft: A reading from Matthew chapter 5, part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: *You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?*

It continued: Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. As a moral concept, those instructions make sense: "Don't wish ill on others. Pray for those who persecute you." But to literally pray for the welfare of our enemies isn't easy. If I stopped this sermon right now and we were to spend five minutes just praying for our enemies, who would you pray for? Who is your enemy right now?

Early yesterday morning I had a different answer for the question "Who is your enemy right now?" My initial thought was to list off groups of people we typically think of as bad or evil—bullies and abusers, criminals and terrorists, foreign powers who threaten America, political figures who blatantly support the very things we hate. We distance ourselves from these people by naming them our "enemies." Then I was all prepared to pop that ideological bubble by sharing poignant stories that humanize some of these people we call "enemies." There was the story of Reginald Betts who did a stupid carjacking as a 16-year old and went to prison for 8 years. Although labeled a felon, he went on to college, married, and graduated from law school. His hardest moment came when someone in his son's kindergarten class told the boy his father had been in prison, prompting the son to look his father in the eyes and ask, "But Daddy, don't only bad people go to jail?" Hopefully that story would prompt us to ask, "Must the felon truly be an enemy?"

I was also aware of this morning's focus on migration and the news about the caravan of Central Americans moving toward the southern American border. I wondered if our inability to see them as individuals fleeing violence, rape, torture or abject poverty,

simply made it easier for us to dismiss them all as threatening lawbreakers and “enemies.”

I knew that long ago Jonah had a very clear picture of who the enemy was. It was the Assyrians living in their opulent capital city. Jonah had no desire to help them. After hearing God’s call, Jonah ran the other way, ending up on a boat in a storm and inside a fish’s belly before finally getting down to the business of praying for Nineveh. And when the Assyrians actually listened to Jonah’s message and repented of their sins, Jonah was furious—sulking on a hill outside of Nineveh, moaning that he wanted to die. Twice God spoke to Jonah, asking him the same thing each time: *Is it right for you to be angry?* Notice that God doesn’t force Jonah to drop the petulant attitude. No lightning bolts came flashing down to make him change his sour mood. Part of the moral of this ancient story is that God wants us to figure it out. God wants our free will and beating hearts and concept of shared humanity to see what is already crystal clear to God—to know that God isn’t the enemy of our enemies. In fact, God is not even the enemy of God’s own enemies.

That much of the old sermon held together for me. Yes, we do create categories of people and wrongly decide they are the enemies—felons (despite their stories of redemption or their being children of God just like us), immigrants (despite their common humanity and motivation of self-preservation for themselves and their children), and others. But what happens when the enemy has a specific name. What happens when the enemy is named Cesar Sayoc, a sad and sick white man sending pipebombs to Democratic politicians across the country? What happens when the enemy is named Robert Bowers, another sad and sick white man from Baldwin, armed with assault weapons and racist rhetoric, who took the lives of innocent people of faith and brave police officers? It makes me mad. It makes me want to sit beside Jonah and rail against a broken world and ignore all of God’s persistent questions.

Here’s part of why I’m so mad. In addition to the sheer tragedy of the shooting, the senseless loss of life of people of faith in a house of faith, a kind and gentle Jewish chaplain named Dan Leger was badly shot. We performed an interfaith wedding ceremony this past June. Dan went out of his way to be hospitable, to honor my Christian faith amidst the rituals of his Jewish faith. He embodied the spirit of the Tree of Life and Dor Hadash synagogue family, as someone who was part of a synagogue that kept their doors open on the Sabbath so that all might freely enter. So I think of Dan as I sulk beside Jonah.

I know there are people whom we call enemies, even though they don’t deserve that name. I also know there are people who act as enemies—lashing out violently due to personal illness, madness, or evil in every sense of that word. For right now I keep those two groups apart, even as I know that from God’s perspective they are not two groups, but only one. I can’t quite go there, but God is aware of our shared pain and patiently waits.

Jonah didn't need God's comfort on that day long ago. But we do. So unlike with Jonah, God weeps with us—the God who is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Ps. 46). God surrounds us within God's arms—the one who gives peace, not as the world gives, so that our heart may not be troubled and neither are we to be afraid (John 14). Those words do comfort, but honestly the anger still remains. And too soon, crowding out God's words, we hear human voices telling us what we are supposed to do next—foolish words that blame the victims, suggesting that they should have had better security at their synagogue—asking why there weren't armed guards at a place called Tree of Life. Guns at houses of worship—guns in schools—guns in grocery stores, movie stores, fast food restaurants, wherever people gather today—those are foolish human answers. Like Jim Crow was a foolish human answer. The Ku Klux Klan and anti-Semitism are foolish, destructive human answers. Like mustard gas and waterboarding and incessant chants to “build that wall” are stupid human answers. They exist only to create divisions—to name someone else as the enemy. They are ungodly and shall have no place in Pittsburgh today.

God comforts during times of loss and pain. But more profoundly, God calls us together. God reminded Jonah and reminds us that the only way forward is forward together. I looked again at the tatters of my earlier sermon. On the last page, I wrote these words: New life in Christ is the door into a safe space leading to healing, new beginnings, and peace. But we are not doorkeepers, choosing who comes in and who stays out. Christ is the door and we are invited to walk through it into that safe space, just as others—friends, enemies, neighbors, strangers—are also invited to enter. To step through that door is to recognize that “enemy” is a flawed human word, a human category we impose on someone else. It is not God's word or God's category at all. To let go of that word is to let go of our anger, to let go of our envy and fear, and walk by faith through Christ's door into a safe space where all are called and all are welcome.

Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies, which is ultimately impossible because by praying for them, we make that category of exclusion meaningless. The act of prayer transforms them and us. If I really asked you the question “Who is your enemy?” the answer is simply “The one whom I have not yet prayed for.” Once we pray for our enemies—those who act as enemies and those who we falsely might label as enemies—the word, the concept and category, loses all power. By praying for them, we are healed.

Miroslav Volf, who lived through the terrible violence of the Serbian wars, said this: *At the heart of the cross is Christ's stance of not letting the other remain an enemy and of creating space in himself for the offender to come in...For the cross is the giving up of God's self in order not to give up on humanity.*

There are no easy answers here. There is only a door we are invited to pass through, one that is equally open to all. It leads to a promise and a lasting assurance that there is a love that will not let us go, a hope that never surrenders to fear, and a light that the darkness cannot overcome if we walk through that door together.