

"Risky Business"
Jonah 3:1-5, 10, 4:1-11 - Mark 1:14-20
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Being a Christian is risky business because you have to set aside your own agenda and put yourself on the line for Jesus.

A life without risk is really no life at all. The only way you can grow into your humanity is by taking those important steps into the darkness trusting Jesus is always there to light the way. On the other hand, if you're never willing to risk yourself for a cause greater than yourself, you'll remain a small self-centered creature, stuck in your fears and prejudices.

Certainly our best role model for risk taking is Jesus who came into the world risking himself so we can be saved from our self-centered selves. When Jesus says "**Follow me,**" you don't need to blaze a new path no one ever traveled, you're not responsible for changing yourself or saving the world. That's Jesus' job. You just follow.

In last Sunday's sermon the disciple Nathanael was highlighted as a prime example of positive discipleship. He heard God's call and basically said, "**Here I am Lord. Tell me what you want me to do.**"

Keep in mind answering God's call doesn't mean you never have second thoughts. Being a disciple isn't always easy because sometimes God may want you to do something or become someone that scares and even angers you.

The Book of Jonah is a morality tale about a prophet who, not willing to take that risk, became a confused, bitter, pitiful man. Jonah is the man all children know was swallowed whole by a whale (really it was a great fish, but that's not important). Unfortunately, his encounter with the great fish is just about the only thing we remember about Jonah, which is really too bad because if you take the time to read all of his story, you can learn an important lesson about your natural inclination to fight God when God wants you to become someone you don't want to be and go somewhere you don't want to go.

Jonah received a call from God. "**Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and cry out against it for their wickedness has come up before me.**"

Instead of saying "**Here I am Lord, send me!**" Jonah's heart hardened. Can you hear him? "**Wait a minute Lord, you can't mean that. Nineveh is the capitol of the Evil Empire. The Assyrians are a Jew's worst enemy. Please, don't send me to preach to those loathsome people. They're beyond redemption. Please, ask me anything but not that.**"

So you can better empathize with Jonah's inner conflict think for a minute of a group of people you can't stand, people who violate your standards and are a real threat to

your way of life. Next, imagine hearing God say, **"Friend, I have a job for you. Go and talk to 'those people' and let them know the pain they are causing me. I need you to point out the error of their ways so they have a chance to be saved. You see, I love them as much as I love you and I need you to let them know that."**

Now maybe you can understand why Jonah was so conflicted. He didn't like the idea his God loved his enemies. It was too much for him, so instead of going east to Nineveh, he jumped on a ship and headed due west, as far away from Nineveh and God as he could get. Why? Jonah knew God would forgive the Assyrians. He even said as much. **"For I know you are a gracious and merciful God abundant in loving kindness..."** Jonah couldn't bear the thought of God using him in this way so he bolted.

It was on his ocean voyage he got swallowed whole by that great fish, but God saved Jonah, gave him a second chance and soon the reluctant prophet found himself in Nineveh. It was probably with a sense of perverse satisfaction Jonah preached the hopeless message: **"In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed."** There was no gospel of hope, only judgment and the promise of destruction. So maybe Jonah was thinking to himself, **"Heh, this isn't so bad after all. I like telling these people they're doomed."**

But then the unexpected happened. For once, a prophet's audience believed the message and repented. This rarely happened, especially in Israel. Usually the prophets' message was rejected. But now deep in the bowels of the capitol city of the Evil Empire, everybody from the king on down repented. They cried out to God for forgiveness, turned from their evil ways and God forgave them.

And Jonah was furious! **"How dare God love my enemies as much as he loves me. It's not fair! It's better for me to die than to live!"**

And that's how the Book of Jonah ends. The people of Nineveh are saved, and Jonah instead of being joyfully and absolutely amazed at the depths of God's grace is sullen and resentful.

The first lesson of the Book of Jonah is this: God is far above and beyond our prejudices and God would rather forgive and save than punish and destroy.

The second lesson: Christ calls us to discipleship because he needs us to release our prejudices so we can love our enemies, the same way Jesus loves us.

Unfortunately, for Jonah, this was too much to bear. He was very comfortable with his prejudices and he saw little need to change, so he didn't.

Jonah's sad story should be a warning. Being a Christian is more than being in church every Sunday. Being Christian is letting God love people you may not love by letting God love these people through you.

Last Monday the nation celebrated Martin Luther King's birthday. King was not a reluctant prophet. Committed to Christ's teaching, Dr. King taught the importance of unconditional love. Because of this message many people reviled him, but King never hated them back. In fact, he never gave up on his enemies. He cared for them as much as he cared for the ones they oppressed because he realized people who hate ultimately end up destroying themselves. And King didn't want to lose anybody.

Last Tuesday, forty years after King's assassination, an African-American was inaugurated to be our president, certainly an historic occasion, but also a hopeful sign that through it all, we are beginning to realize we are all God's children.

Something tells me the youngest among us are probably thinking, "So what's the big deal? He's black, why should that make a difference?" If that's true, that in itself is a big deal and maybe when their children come of age, occasions similar to Obama's election will be taken for granted. Let's hope so.

But let's not fool ourselves into thinking fear and prejudice has gone the way of polio and smallpox. We are still sinners, prone to caving in to the temptation to hate and fear people different than us. The devil is still prowling around using our latent fears and prejudices to divide us from one another, all the while letting us feel downright self-righteous about ourselves.

That's precisely why we need to submit to Jesus and be gathered together in his beloved community. The days are coming when the races won't segregate themselves any longer on Sunday mornings. We're beginning to realize people find ultimate commonality not genetically but spiritually because, after all, love is thicker than blood. This is how Jesus envisioned his Church in the first place. This is how Jesus wants us to live together.

Jonah is an Old Testament parable warning against self-righteous prejudice. It's a lesson we need to learn over and over again because the temptation will always be to be more like Jonah than to be more like Jesus. But when we take the risk and love the unlovable it helps us appreciate more the risk Jesus took loving you and me.

Discipleship may be risky business, but it's the only way to do business in the God's Kingdom. Let us pray we continue to grow and move in the right direction towards Nineveh so God can love "those people" through us and we can learn to love them as well.