



Blessed are the Peacemakers

Matthew 5:9 & Jonah 3:1-4

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

February 17, 2019

Over the past five weeks we have been considering how Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, focusing on the Beatitudes, addresses one of the greatest problems we face as a society. As my colleague, Rev. Rob Lough defines it, "The volume of anger and mistrust has become so loud that not only are we struggling to find answers to technical challenges which face our society, but we've found ourselves increasingly unable to even hear one another."

Indeed, whether in regards to our political differences, our views on immigration, our understanding of racial tension, our religious views, or whatever our next disagreement may be on ... our biggest problem isn't that differences exist, it's that we have lost the ability to engage with civility. In the world today, we classify the other (whoever the 'other' may be) as evil, and wish God's greatest punishment upon them. From school aged cliques, to denominational alignments, it seems in the world today, it's not enough to affiliate oneself with people of like-mind. No, in today's world, we have to destroy those whose minds differ ... or at a minimum, send them out to exile.

The criticism seems appropriate, but then, perhaps I shouldn't be so hard on society as it stands today. This kind of ill-wishing the 'other' is not as new as one might suppose.

Cue the story of Jonah.

Generally when Jonah comes up, people first recall the most memorable details. Namely, that Jonah was swallowed by a large aquatic animal, and that God saved him from certain death. ... I say large aquatic animal because who really cares if it was a whale or a large fish. I'm pretty sure the ancient Hebrews weren't studying genus and species at the time. I doubt their ability to classify an animal as *Odontoceti* or *Scombroidei*, or whatever other suborder of marine life the animal could have come from. (No, I don't know anything about those two suborders, and if I mispronounced them, my bad. I just know Google says they are both marine life suborders. The Hebrew people didn't have the benefit of 'the Google' back then.) Suffice it to say, for the purpose of the story, the animal was not small – it was large enough that Jonah could be swallowed whole, and over the course of three days, not be digested. Anyway, I digress ...

The point is, beyond the fact that Jonah was swallowed by this large fishy animal, what more do we know about the story? Understanding Jonah's work in Nineveh requires knowledge of the full story. The story is something of a Shakespearean comedy, and is worth reading in full. It's only four chapters long. We won't read the whole thing, but here's the story ...

God summoned Jonah – a man we are led to believe was of great faith. He is classified in our Biblical groupings as a minor prophet. He deserves the respect of a prophet. God calls him and

says, "Go at once to Nineveh, and cry out against it, their wickedness has come up before me." Yet, Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh. Instead, he fled the opposite direction, boarding a boat to get as far away from Nineveh as he could manage. Jonah believed by fleeing, he could escape not only Nineveh, but he could flee even the presence of the Lord. But the Lord caused a great storm on the seas, and the boat was ravaged by the water.

The boat was full of a diverse group of people, people of many faiths. Everyone aboard was fearful of their demise, so they all began to pray, each to their own god. That is, all but Jonah, who had gone down into the hull to sleep. He didn't want to call upon God, he was running away from God. Praying to God might have activated the prayer-based GPS of his location, and God might have found him. As the storm carried on, it became clear that Jonah was the problem, and he was thrown overboard into the sea at which time, as we know, he was swallowed by a large aquatic animal. He was there in the belly of the fish for three days, until he was, but a work of God, spit out upon dry land.

So here we have Jonah on the shore, smelling like the inside of a fish's belly. He's tried running from God, but God pursued him and spared him from certain death in the depths of the sea. Here Jonah lies, dripping of salt water and fish digestion on the sandy beach. And God speaks again, almost identically to the first time, "Jonah – Get up, go to Nineveh, and proclaim the message I will give you."

If you're Jonah, you can only be thinking one thing, "This stinks." Literally, it stinks. He's covered in fish bile.

Reluctantly, Jonah gets up and heads toward Nineveh. It's a large metropolis. Our text today says it was so large that it would take three days to walk across the city. Historical records indicate the city had as many as 120,000 people at the time of Jonah. It's about as populated as our own City of Alexandria, but they didn't have high-rise condominiums. The city is spread wide. Jonah begins walking into the city. After a day he's almost at the center of the city. There he stops and cries out this short simple proclamation, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Everything we know of Nineveh makes such a proclamation seem reasonable. In chapter 1, God says Jonah needs to go to Nineveh because the wickedness of the city is so great. The story harkens back to Sodom and Gomorrah, which were destroyed because of a lack of faithfulness among the residents of the city. It seems God may have the same purpose in mind here.

Yet, immediately after Jonah makes his proclamation, in the very next verse, we read, "The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth (which is a sign of mourning)." Jonah's proclamation didn't even invoke the name of God. Jonah did and said nothing that would indicate that his assurance of the city's destruction was a threat of the Almighty. And yet, the people believed God in response to his prophetic proclamation, and they repented of their many sinful ways. They would be spared a fate of destruction because of their response. One would think that such a response of redemption would be a favorable outcome, but Jonah seems disappointed. Jonah can't stand that they are being spared the fate he believed he was prophesying,

After God decides not to decimate the city because of their repentance, we read in chapter 4, “This was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became very angry.” Jonah cries out to God, “This God ... this very outcome ... this is why I fled in the beginning. Because I know you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah is so disappointed that he even invites his own death. “O Lord,” Jonah laments, “please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

The story says that Jonah was angry and ready to die because God had extended mercy to the Ninevites even after they repented of their wrongdoings. How could Jonah be so devastated at God’s awesome grace?

A quick history lesson: At the start of Jonah’s prophetic career, the Hebrew people were divided into two kingdoms – the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Assyrians, the Middle East powerhouse, were attacking portions of the Northern Kingdom. In less than 50 years after Jonah’s visit to Nineveh, the Assyrians, under the leadership of King Sargon II, would fully decimate the Northern Kingdom of Israel. It would literally cease to exist. Many of the Israelites would be killed, and those who weren’t would be exiled.

It just so happens that Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian kingdom. This was ground zero for those who were killing Jonah’s own people.

Jonah was being called to go into the heart of the kingdom that was slaughtering and exiling his people, and he was sent with this message that God was going to overthrow them. All the while, Jonah knew well and good that it was possible God would not follow through with such destruction because of God’s merciful nature. Jonah wanted the Assyrians to be destroyed. Jonah wanted their ruin. Jonah wanted God’s wrath to rain down from the heavens, much like God had done with Egypt before. But Jonah also knew that God was ready, willing, and capable of extending grace and new life to the very people he wanted dead.

Jonah enjoyed God’s peace for himself, and as a prophet, proclaimed God’s promise to the Hebrew people time and time again. He wanted God’s assurance for *himself* and *his* people, but he did not want it for those he saw as enemies. And so we find ourselves in good company when we share this kind of savage mentality.

This kind of bitter desire is not reserved for prophets and kings. It’s the same kind of urging we scream from our driver’s seats when people cut us off in traffic. “I hope you get into a wreck!” Or when someone takes the last chocolate covered donut from the case right in front of us. “I hope you choke on that!” Or when someone else is given the lead role in the drama production. “I hope you literally break a leg!” ... It’s this same kind of Jonah-esque bitterness that wishes harm on those who we dislike, or who end up with a better slice of the pie than we believe they deserve.

Jonah can’t stand that those he believes are worthy of God’s greatest punishment are receiving God’s greatest gift – forgiveness and new life.

As we have been considering the Beatitudes over the past month, we've seen that Jesus' preaching is not just about individual facets of faithfulness, but that the Sermon on the Mount is a step-by-step instruction manual for faithfulness. We begin by admitting we are broken – a mentality that is exemplified through an impoverished spirit. Naming our brokenness, we mourn for how unable we are to save ourselves. Admitting our inability, we humble ourselves before the Almighty in a demeanor of meekness. Acknowledging we are unable to save ourselves, but that God indeed can, we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We pursue focus on God's will, on God's strength, and on God's desire for humanity on the whole.

As we seek God, as we focus on God, we are filled with the traits of God – like being merciful and being pure of heart. And we find ourselves in 5:9, hearing Christ's preaching, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Blessed are those who don't just *desire*, but who *actively make* peace.

Imagine if Jonah had not desired for the destruction of Nineveh, but instead had truly pursued God's righteousness. Instead of being disappointed in God's grace, he could have rejoiced. God desires peace – God desires the reconciliation of all humanity. But Jonah was too bitter and shortsighted to see God's great plan. And we are not unlike Jonah. "As a nation, and certainly as people of faith, we must change our hearts and minds (we must repent) of the racism and judgmental attitude that have been problematic since the beginnings of humanity."ⁱ

We're so busy wanting to be right, that we can't see the good of God in the midst of the places we are wrong. Just consider, *Jonah* is the one we are led to believe is the faithful one in this story. He's the prophet. Jonah's the one who got the book named after him ... but it's the people of Nineveh who in this story understand the goodness of God's salvation. They are the ones who repent and receive the fullness of God's glory. ... They admitted their brokenness, they mourned – they were wearing sackcloth! They took before God a humility to name God's way as greater than their own. It's the very ones the faithful thought were un-savable that God makes clear have received salvation.

Christ says that if we align ourselves as faithful disciples, being poor in spirit, mourning our brokenness, being meek, seeking righteousness, being merciful, and being pure in heart, we *will* be peacemakers because we will be joining in God's work among humanity to ensure all people know the love of redemption and salvation. God's vision is that all flesh would become Children of God ... and Jesus said when we make peace, that's exactly what we are.ⁱⁱ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called Children of God."

This week in the United Methodist Church invites the people of God to consider this path of discipleship laid out in the Beatitudes. As we prepare as a global denomination to head into a called Special Session of our General Conference, this willingness to admit a lack of perfect knowledge and to submit in humility to God's will is vitally important. For those who haven't been informed, the global body of the United Methodist Church meets this coming weekend, February 23-26, to discern how we will step into the future regarding denominational policy concerning same-sex marriage and the ordination of members of the LGBTQ community.

The 864 delegates – half laity and half clergy – representing the global body, will meet in St. Louis to worship, to pray, and to consider some 78 petitions that have been submitted. The

decisions of the General Conference could alter our current *Book of Discipline* and give structure, authority, clarity, separation, division, and / or permission around these two topics of marriage and ordination. As I've offered previously, I'm available to meet and answer questions for anyone who is seeking more clarity regarding General Conference and the possible outcomes. I'm happy to define the process and possibilities, but to be clear, I do not know what outcome is most likely. With delegates that represent the vast cultural and societal differences of the world, some 42% of the delegates come from outside the United States, I can only say that I yearn for God's will to be understood and accepted.

Here at Washington Street, we will gather next Sunday and spend time in worship and prayer for the General Conference, the delegates who discern, the bishops who lead, and the church who listens in baited expectation. I hope you'll be here, because, while we do not directly have a vote or voice in this matter, we do have the power of prayer. And God is faithful, even to the most unexpected, who pray in earnest.

And for the love of the One who came to give us new life, we will, regardless the outcome of the General Conference, maintain our mission of *Making a Place for Everyone to know the Love of God*. This mission begins by following the teachings of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. I invite you to receive Christ's guidance in the Beatitudes, and let them lead and guide your faithfulness. Christ did not just teach to lead our engagement in politics, or social justice, or racial reconciliation, or cultural righteousness ... Christ knew we needed faithfulness to get through our own messes in the Body – in the church.

Christ offered that through an impoverished spirit – admitting our brokenness, and mourning our detriment ... and through humbling ourselves before God, being meek and naming God's rightness amidst our wrongness ... and pursuing righteousness (not *rightness*), we could be reconciled **by** the One who offers reconciliation. And in pursuing righteousness, and being reconciled to God and one another, we can fulfill Christ's invitation to be peacemakers who extend the invitation of God's grace to all. Because in God's eyes, we are one creation, one humanity, one people under one Lord. And right or wrong, left or right, tall or short, white or black, young or old, God has opened the church to people of all ages, nations, and races. And in the midst of such a blessed diversity, we are invited to be agents of God's peace.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God.

ⁱ Melissa Bane Sevier. "Nineveh, that ****hole place." Melissabanesevier.wordpress.com. Retrieved February 13, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Rob Lough. "Blessed are the Peacemakers." Ebenezerumc.org. Retrieved February 13, 2019.