

The People I Love To Hate

On Sunday, we studied the story of the prophet Jonah – and in the process learned something important about ourselves, God, and others.

1. Warm-up question: The book of Jonah is a powerful reminder that it's not easy to live at peace with our fellow human beings. Has anyone ticked you off this past week (in ways large or small)? If so, what happened?
2. The setting for the book of Jonah is somewhere around 750 B.C. Just to the north, the Assyrian Empire was becoming increasingly powerful and threatening. It was Israel's chief enemy, and Nineveh was its capital. Yet Jonah heard God calling him, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me. But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord." Jonah 1:2. Tarshish was located in Spain, at the edge of the known world.
 - a. Have you ever sensed a calling from God to do something that made you want to run in the opposite direction? What happened?
 - b. Jonah boarded a ship to Tarshish, ended up in the middle of a huge storm at sea, was thrown overboard, swallowed by a great fish, transported back to Israel, and vomited back up on shore. What are we supposed to learn from this part of the story?
 - c. The miracle of Jonah's survival in the belly of the fish is one of the most disputed in the Bible. Some see it as an actual historical occurrence, some see it as sacred parable. Does it matter to you whether this story is history or parable? Why does it matter – or not matter – to you?
3. After Jonah was spewed out of the fish back onto dry land, God called to him again. Read Jonah 3:1 – 4:3.
 - a. What do you think Jonah was thinking and feeling when God called to him a second time?
 - b. Jonah delivered his message to the Ninevites: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" With what attitude do you imagine Jonah preaching his message?
 - c. Have you ever experienced an angry preacher of judgment and damnation? How did it affect you?
4. Amazingly, the people of Nineveh repented, "but this was very displeasing to Jonah," who proceeded to tell God (loose paraphrase), "This is why I ran away the first time. I wanted them to get what they deserved, but I knew, I just knew, you were going to forgive them!" From all this, Jeff suggested, we can learn three important lessons: one about ourselves, one about God, and one about others. **For ourselves, the lesson is:**

Like Jonah, it's easy for us to hate our enemies, and it's important for us to recognize that we are all susceptible to that temptation. Sometimes we're tempted to hate a person who has done us wrong; other times we're tempted to hate a whole category of people.

- a. With the understanding that what we say here stays here, who are you tempted to hate? (Someone you wish would get what they deserve!)
 - b. People are also often tempted to hate whole categories of people – Muslims, immigrants, liberals, conservatives, Fox News watchers, MSNBC watchers, the New England Patriots, etc. Especially in our polarized political environment, it can be tempting to hate. What group of people are you most tempted to hate?
5. But God is not like us. As we see in the book of Jonah, God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah 4:2. In the very last verse of the book, God says, “Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?” **From this we drew a lesson about God: God loves everybody passionately and wants even my worst enemy to be redeemed.**
- a. Read Luke 15:1-7. What does this parable teach us about God?
 - b. Jeff shared a story about a pastoral colleague who, as a small child, thought Jesus wasn't for her because she is African American, but had only seen pictures of a white Jesus playing with white children. She experienced a vision where Jesus' robe/spirit came out of the picture to play with her. It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship. Have you ever wondered if God was for “people like you”? What finally persuaded you?
6. If God believes everyone is redeemable – even Israel's worst oppressors, the Ninevites – then we should to. **From this we drew a lesson about others: Everybody is redeemable, and we should act like it.** We should interact with our enemies in ways that are meant to redeem them, rather than write them off.
- a. Think about the person you identified in Question 4.a. What might it look like for you to interact with them in a way that is potentially redemptive?
 - b. Does interacting with our enemy in redemptive ways mean we can't stand up for ourselves or challenge them? If it is ok to challenge them, how can we do so in a redemptive way?
 - c. In our polarized political climate, what might it look like to interact with our political opponents in potentially redemptive ways?
 - d. At the very end of the sermon, Jeff showed a scene from Gandhi. For anyone who wasn't present on Sunday, describe what happened. What did you think of that scene?