

“(Dis)Approval Ratings”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 6, 2016

Jonah 1:1-17; 3:1-10; 4:1-11

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, “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. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” “I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, “What is this that you have done!” For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, “What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?” For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.” Nevertheless the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, “Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.” So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows. But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

...The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, “Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.” So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s walk. And he cried out, “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. He prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I

knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Then Jonah went out of the city and sat down east of the city, and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, waiting to see what would become of the city. The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." Then the Lord said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Did anyone else here have a hard time getting up on Thursday morning? There was a bit of a cliffhanger that kept many of us up on Wednesday night. I'm looking especially at the man whose email address is "mncubfan"—how are *you* feeling, Chuck?? If you were under a rock or stranded on a desert island for the last week, you might have missed the news that the Chicago Cubs are the "Lovable Losers" no longer. After more than a century of losing, the Cubs have won the World Series of baseball. All throughout this past year as one thing after another fell in place for them, Cubs fans kept pinching themselves and reminding each other not to get their hopes up too high. Their team—like a certain Minnesota pro football team—always manages to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory. The Cubs actually winning the World Series seemed unbelievable. The Boston Herald's front page on Thursday captioned the moment the best: "Pigs fly. Hell freezes over. Cubs win!"

What do you suppose was the feeling on Thursday morning in Cleveland, home of the other team? I searched the Ohio [newspaper headlines](#), but there were no signs of joy there. Instead, the news read: "So Close", "Loss for the Ages", and "Heartbreak by the Lake". Our United Church of Christ national headquarters are in Cleveland, and I heard that it was *very* quiet in the offices on Thursday. The UCC prides itself on championing the cause of the underdog—and with their impeccable losing history the Cubs certainly qualify. Nevertheless, it violates "team spirit" to rejoice when something good happens to the "wrong" side.

No wonder, then, that Jonah feels such righteous anger at God over the merciful treatment of the Ninevites. Jonah is a prophet sent to declare divine judgment against them. God says, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Nineveh was a place that inspired narrowed eyes and disgust from Jonah. It was a capital city of the enemy Assyrians, [across the Tigris River from the city of Mosul](#) in modern-day Iraq. In Jonah's eyes, the Ninevites were a "basket of deplorables", their approval ratings *definitely* under water. He'd be only too glad to see God smite them from the face of the earth. So when Jonah finally gets to Nineveh, he doesn't work very hard to change their ways. Other prophets proclaim chapter after chapter describing God's judgment, whole books exhorting their audiences to change. But Jonah uses just one short sentence: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" This is what [one commentator](#) calls "the least heartfelt sermon ever".

Now consider what happens next. "*The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.*" The king covered himself with the ashes of repentance. He proclaimed that nobody should eat or drink, as a sign of how sorry they were. Even the animals fasted, wore sackcloth and prayed for divine mercy. Who knew that Jonah surviving three days the belly of a

great fish was the most *believable* part of the story? The truly preposterous part is that Jonah preaches nine words and the entire enemy capital is converted!

Nevertheless, in light of their repentance God reconsiders the calamity that would have destroyed Nineveh. Then sputtering Jonah hits the ceiling. “I knew it, God!! You always do this! *You are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.* Every time that anyone starts to have a change of heart—including our worst enemies!—there you are offering forgiveness!” Jonah’s critique boils down to this: God is not a “team player”. That’s the difference between God and human beings like Jonah. God cares more for mercy than punishment or revenge. God wants the redemption of *all*, not just those who are on “our” side.

This matters today because we are on the cusp of a most consequential election. I have not seen the American public this divided and hostile to one another in all my life. Our media and political parties have participated in a “race to the bottom” whereby the candidate who wins is the one who drives up higher the disapproval ratings of the other. What makes the news are not competing proposals for the upbuilding of the nation and world, but scandals that take the feet out from under one side or the other. We may be sheltered from the worst vitriol against the presidential candidates, but back-to-back ads smearing House candidates have been blaring ominously from our televisions for weeks on end.

Tuesday’s election will finally decide these contests—can anyone say “alleluia”?? But that which has been revealed in this election cycle will not go away on Wednesday morning. Seams of division have been split open by the dark arts of electoral fearmongering, and trust in the process of democracy itself hangs in the balance. This is personal as well as political: friend circles, work relationships, and the family tables we anticipate at Thanksgiving bring us face-to-face with people whose election decisions we condemn. I’m sure we are of multiple minds here at church too. We have every encouragement in the world to demonize those who are “other”, and call for the repudiation of not just political parties but people as well. Jonah stands ready to write off the Ninevites, content to tear off entire limbs from the body politic.

Except: we follow a God who is *“gracious...and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.”* We are Christians united in the body of Christ, baptized in the death and resurrection of Christ, and fed at the table of Christ. The church witnesses to unity in Christ’s love, seeking a just world for *all*. Because here’s the thing—when Jesus sits at table for the Lord’s Supper before his own body was crowned with thorns, then pierced and killed, he did not insist that everyone there think like he did. In the upper room where Christ passed the bread and the cup, there were people with lots of problems, and they brought those problems with them to the table. They brought betrayal, in the presence of Judas. They brought desertion, in the presence of Peter. They were sinners. And some, I assume, were good people. Christ did not ask for party affiliation or allegiance when he decided whom to serve. Instead, he passed the bread and the cup to all, proclaiming unity in the place of brokenness and community in the place of isolation.

This is still the message of Christ’s table and of Christ’s church: that grace invites every person in (no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey), then grace leads us in the challenging growth process of discovering the best in another and confessing the worst in ourselves. In this way, God’s truth is more fully realized and grace reveals saints where we might have seen only sinners. That is what Jonah experiences, and that is the unique community of the church in this time. Our Conference Minister Shari Prestemon put it most clearly [when she wrote this past week](#):

[Christians] have a moral and theological imperative to be fully engaged in the healing, restorative work our nation now so desperately needs. As a prophetic church, we must be willing to name and confront the social sins — racism, sexism, xenophobia, etc.—that this campaign season has so harshly laid bare. But at the same time we as Church have to find a way to make real our own theological language of grace, forgiveness, and redemption. We need to call upon that extravagant

love we proudly profess to begin stitching the gaping wounds of our nation back together. And while doing it we need to be willing to see the sacred and inherently good image of God in every single person we encounter, even and especially when the person in front of us is the person with whom we have adamant disagreement.

I believe in that vision, which is why I'm here on Sunday morning and not somewhere else. I suspect it's why you're here too. That is the community that God feeds at the table of Christ, the community which we endorse by our presence, and the community we strengthen today with our pledges and offerings. These are signs back to God, that the table open to all, including our enemies, holds more hope for us than the donkey or the elephant. We are co-creators with God in all that we do and all that we empower in Christ's name. We will not flee the confrontation with those we consider enemies in Tarshish. Instead, we will follow God's call, pray earnestly for blessing on the people with whom we disagree, seek holy wisdom at the ballot box and in all we do publicly and privately, then celebrate wildly when God makes clear a healing way forward. With divine grace, our sentiments may differ from that of Jonah, as we give and participate in gratitude for God's deliverance of the winner and loser alike.

Let us pray: *Holy God of power and might, thank you for the inspiration of unity beyond that which we could accomplish by ourselves. Hold our communities, our nation and our world in your grace, then show us how to be repairers of the breach in Jesus' name. Amen.*