

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 11/12/2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

The story of Jonah is somewhat familiar to all of us. God tells Jonah to go preach in Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want to go there so he gets on a boat headed the other way. Jonah ends up being thrown into the sea where he is swallowed by a great fish or whale. Three days later, he is then deposited on the shore, and now goes to Nineveh where he does preach God's message and Nineveh repents. Those are the details that many of us know in varying degrees.

A deeper study of the Book of Jonah, though, reveals some important information of which we need to be aware. Why is it that Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh? Why does he resist God's command to go there?

Nineveh is an Assyrian city and full of evil. Yet can God forgive the Assyrians? Not unless they turn from their evil ways. But that can't happen unless they hear the word of God and repent. And that can't happen unless someone—Jonah—goes and preaches there and warns them to turn to God. So, two important questions emerge from this story? First, can God forgive the Ninevites? Clearly, God can and does forgive all who look to God. And second, can Jonah forgive the Ninevites? This question is probably harder to discern from the narrative, but it is there, nonetheless. We likely feel that what Jonah thinks shouldn't really matter at all, should it? It should only matter whether God does. But because Jonah can't forgive them, he chooses to ignore God and go the other way from Nineveh. (And, in a sense, he refuses to turn to God and do what God commands. Is he any worse than the Ninevites, at least until he spends three days in the belly of a sea creature?)

Even by the end of the story, when the Ninevites have repented and committed themselves to God's ways, Jonah isn't happy. Rather than rejoicing that 120,000 people have turned to God and been saved, Jonah is "*greatly displeased and became angry.*" (Jonah 4:1) Jonah even tells God that he is upset about God's mercy. "*I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.*" Jonah is angry that these people, who he feels are unworthy of God's love and mercy, have been saved by God. He doesn't like *his* God caring about other people. God, however, asks Jonah, "*Should I not be concerned about that great city? (Jonah 4:11)*

Sadly, and too often, we are like Jonah. We look around us and see people who we feel are not worth of God's grace and love. We want *our* God to ignore them, abandon them, even punish them, because they are not the kind of people that we think they should be, even if they turn to God. But should our feelings really matter? It should only matter whether God does. It is for us to go where God sends us, to care for those who turn to God, even if they don't meet our standards or expectations. More than that, we should rejoice when others who are outside of God love, turn to God and, in faith, commit themselves to the God of Jonah and Nineveh and

us. Rather than being angry or offended or displeased by God's mercy, our response should be joy because they, like we, have become the beneficiaries of God's gracious love.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey