

The Incredible Edible: Jonah, Part 1

(A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of Knox Presbyterian church, Kenmore, NY, June 16, 1985)

Eight years ago this August Kay and I took a month's vacation in England, Scotland and Wales. When we were in Edinburgh, Scotland I wanted very much to attend a worship service in the Free Church of Scotland. The "Wee Frees", as they are called, are an extremely small denomination which, more than any other, preserves the faith of John Knox who lived way back in the 1500s. It's extremely Calvinistic, orthodox and separatistic. It has little to do with the much larger Church of Scotland which it considers apostate.

We found a 'Wee Free' church in the heart of Edinburgh, just a few blocks from St. Giles Cathedral, the Castle, and the home of John Knox. We got to the unadorned sanctuary before anyone else. We sat and read the bulletin which included a note for visitors. It said something like, "If you find us somewhat reserved and restrained in our welcome of visitors, let us assure you that our welcome is none-the-less real." We later discovered that really meant, "Please excuse our rudeness and unfriendliness since we treat all people that way and it is our custom to ignore strangers." Not one person even so much as looked at us after the service. Not one person spoke to us or in any way acknowledged our presence. In fact, when we went to introduce ourselves they turned and went off in another direction. I suppose they felt that speaking after worship would spoil the solemn atmosphere and direct their minds away from God. There was one couple who did recognize our presence at the beginning of the service. I took him to be a retired minister and his wife since he was wearing a clerical collar. Though they didn't speak to us they did indicate by standing and staring that we were sitting in their pew and would we please move. I began to understand why the "Wee Frees" are so wee. They're so cold and separatistic that they have little to do with anyone outside their own circles.

They're a good example of what Judaism was like when the book of Jonah was written. God wanted Israel to be a blessing to the nations, a light to attract the nations to the way of righteousness and peace, a missionary people to bring good news to the world that the Lord reigns over all the forces in the world that seek to hurt and divide and destroy. But Israel was a very close knit group of people, somewhat snobbish, looking down on the rest of the world, and talking only to themselves. It was to no prophet Jonah among such people that no word of the Lord came telling him to go to Nineveh.

1

Why did God want Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach against it? The answer is

found in the very last chapter of Jonah where God says to the prophet, "Should not I pity 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." God wanted Jonah to go and preach against Nineveh, not in self-righteousness, but in pity. But when Jonah heard God calling him he ran away and headed for Tarshish. Nineveh was to the east of Israel, beyond the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. But Tarshish was on the extreme western shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It was probably a city in Spain. In other words, Jonah set out to go in the very opposite direction in an effort to avoid the mission God had given him.

Why did Jonah flee from the Lord and his commands? The answer is simple. Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed. The Ninevites were pagan, tyrannical, immoral, and cruel. They didn't know the difference between right and wrong. They were the Nazi's or the communists of the ancient world. Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, was Israel's arch-enemy and oppressor. Jonah had foreseen that God would save Nineveh through his preaching and he didn't want that to happen. [Jonah knew that a nation might repent, turn to God and still be just as militaristic. The Assyrian king might declare a national day of prayer one day and the next seek military aid to overthrow a rival nation. Jonah didn't want that to happen. Jonah didn't want Nineveh saved.]

2

So often Jonah's attitude is the attitude of Christians. [We can be orthodox in beliefs, but cold, self-righteous, condescending in attitudes towards those outside of Christ and hawkish towards our nation's enemies. We're so concerned to keep ourselves unspotted from the world that we have absolutely nothing to say as Christians to people whose lives have been influenced far more by our secular culture than by the Bible.] We're so concerned that we remain powerful as a nation that, like Jonah, we subjugate God's mission to the more powerful claim of our nation's interests. We would rather see our enemies hurt than reconciled to God? [We are more likely to vote to send bombs to our enemies than butter or the gospel.]

Jonah's fears are so often the fears of Christians. He feared that if Nineveh repented the unique status of Israel in the plan of God would be threatened. And, of course, he was right. As gentiles came more and more into the church Israel as a nation became less and less important. [Today, Jews make up only an insignificant number of Christians. Unless you go to a Messianic Jewish church there is very little to remind us of our Jewish roots. Gentile customs and thought forms have replaced Jewish ones.]

or in the American Church. we've had
 missionaries all to people, Indonesia, Korea,
 Africa, etc., etc., etc.,
 Central America & So. America
 China ... as no longer
 power authority of
 American Church
 is dismissed.
 we don't always
 get things our way

A similar thing happens in a local church. Many of you have known each other for years and years. Some of you grew up in this church. This is "your church" in a very special way. How would you feel if it ceased to be "your church"? How would you feel if you lost some of your control? How would you feel if it increasingly became the church of others; people who don't know as much about the Bible as you do, people whose lives have not been as faithful as yours, people who may not believe everything you do but who do share with you something of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? How would you feel if these people began to come to this church, joined, became increasingly involved, began to take your places on the session, so that you who have been here for so many years are passed over in favor of someone new, inexperienced, and perhaps not as orthodox as you? That is something of what Jonah feared.

who worship differently
 like different songs.
 would you really
 want to go through
 this.

These fears are well founded. A growing church risks losing something very valuable. All those incoming Ninevites threaten a church's identity, unity, and family atmosphere. The Ninevites would have the same Bible but they would interpret it differently, out of their Ninevite background. "What are we going to do with all these Ninevites", some of the older families would begin to say. "They don't speak our language. [They know very little about the Bible.] They interpret it differently. I wonder if they even believe the Bible. Their theology is so different. It would be alright if they simply came and worshipped with us but what if they begin to take over? [It's alright if they come to our prayer meetings as long as they're satisfied with doing things the way we always have.] But they're going to begin to change things. What if they introduce forms of worship that we aren't accustomed to and demand hymns with Ninevite tunes [rather than the good old Gospel songs?]" Powerful leaders would feel their influence waning. So there is a real danger that we, as a local church might follow the example of Jonah, flee from the face of the Lord and refuse to carry out the mission God has given to us as a congregation. We might lose something very valuable if we don't remain wee and free.

Jonah tried to avoid God's command. As a result he was swallowed up by a great fish. ^{You can argue around & you want to about whether or not that's to be taken literally.} God has also commanded us. If we fail to obey we too will be swallowed up. We can avoid Jonah's fate only by obeying God and taking our mission seriously. ^{we must go to the unchurched people around us.} We must not use methods which are manipulative, paternalistic, and simplistic. We must use methods and techniques that do not undermine or circumvent the church as God's instrument of evangelism because it's the church, and only the church, that has been charged with this responsibility.

When Jonah finally did obey the Lord, he did so without any real love. We must find winning ways of showing people the self-destructive outcome of ~~their~~ behavior and lifestyles but at the heart of our evangelism and mission must be compassion and love. The critical test for mission and evangelism today is the presence of compassion. Can we feel with those who are hungry? Can we feel for those Russian soldiers trying to subjugate Afghanistan as well as the Afghan refugees? Can we feel for the Marxist Nicaraguan government as well as the so called 'freedom-fighters'? Can we feel for those in our neighborhood who are thoroughly secular, who may be crass, who constantly take the Lord's name in vain, who have the morals of a billie-goat, and who have very little sensitivity to spiritual things? Jesus did and so must we. Jesus was not a proselytiser of sinners but their friend.

The story that we tell is the old, old story. It's good news, not bad news. Because God has been gracious to us in Jesus Christ, we ~~shall~~ repent, rejoice, and believe. It is not what we must do to be saved, but what God has already done to save. It is the story of the love of God seen in Jesus. It is the love that cares for others, that tells about a Savior who is ruling the universe, and who went to hell himself rather than to send us there, who invites us all to enjoy God forever. [This love is not a method used to get a decision. Love is never manipulative. Love is never calculated. Love is active, sharing, without adding up the bottom line. It rejects statistical Christianity as a particular heresy of an age enamored by calculators, and it seeks the total well-being of persons and peoples.]

"To live or not to live? That is the question." To be consumed, or not to be consumed? That is our question. On the seal of the Presbyterian church is a bush that burns but is not consumed. When our church obeys God's commands it will burn with the power of the spirit but it will not be consumed. Too often the more appropriate symbol of the church is Jonah in the belly of the whale, consumed as a result of disobedience. Which will it be for us? The burning bush that is not consumed or Jonah, consumed by the whale. Will we disobey God and be consumed? Or will we obey God, burn with the power of the Holy Spirit and be a truly evangelical and missionary church?

Let us pray: Lord of all truth, make us sensitive and humble in our approach to modern secular men and women. Help us to understand their confusion, and appropriate their quest. Help us to respond to their cry and serve them with care, understanding and compassion. May your Holy Spirit so guide us to interpret your truth that many may come to find in you their purpose, their meaning and their life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.