

March 6, 2016
2 Corinthians 5:17-19 (NLT)
Jonah 2:1-10

Changing our Ways

There are times when we want things to change. We want a crummy school year to change. We want a mean friend to change. We want bad things in the world like war or poverty to change. Sometimes kids might want their parents to change. Sometimes parents want their kids to change, too. Sometimes we want others to change. But sometimes it's us who need to change. We need to change how we act or how we think. Because that's the one thing we can change. For the past couple of weeks, we've been talking about baptism and what it means for us and why we do it and today I want us to think about how the waters of baptism are the waters of change; we invite God to change us. Our attitudes and our ideas. To turn us from our ways to God's way. Our baptism story today is about Jonah. Jonah is the guy in the Bible, who ends up in a whale, or a big fish. And today, that's where we find Jonah; he is in the belly of a big fish. And the reason Jonah is in the belly of this big fish is not because of someone else. This is no one else's fault. He is in the belly of a big fish with its smelly fish guts. And

it's not the fault of the big fish. It's not the fault of the sailors who tossed him overboard. It's not the fault of the ship that started to break apart in the wind and waves. It's not the fault of the storm clouds or the raging sea. Jonah's situation was no one else's fault but his own. And Jonah knew it.

Jonah was in the fish's belly because he was supposed to go to Nineveh. God had told Jonah to go Nineveh and tell the people of Nineveh that they needed to change their ways. They needed to stop being mean.

They needed to stop being unfair. And God needed someone to go tell them and show them the right thing to do. And Jonah was that someone. He was supposed to go to Nineveh. But he didn't want to go to Nineveh. Instead, Jonah got on a boat and went the opposite way.

Jonah knew which way he should go. He knew what God wanted him to do. But Jonah didn't want to do it. He could think of a million reasons why he couldn't, why he shouldn't go to Nineveh. Nineveh was SO far away. It would be such a LONG trip. And it would be so HARD! It would be hard to get there and then it would be HARD to talk to these

people and it would be HARD to get them to listen. Even if it was the way God wanted him to go, it was too difficult.

Maybe you can think of a time when you had to do something hard.

Maybe it was cleaning up your room or doing your chores. Or helping your brother or sister. Or going to school. Or going to work. Or visiting your strange Aunt Marjorie or welcoming a new neighbor. Doing what is right and good, what God wants us to do, is sometimes hard.

It's hard to go the way we ought to go. So sometimes, we run away, just like Jonah. We hide from those things or we avoid them. I remember one time, when I was in school, I lived in a dormitory. And every summer, we had to move out of our rooms. We had to pack up all of our stuff, every bit of it, and store it in the basement of the building. And at the end of the school year, boy, oh, boy that was NOT how I wanted to spend my time. It was HARD and I didn't want to do it. So I found other things to do. I played games on my computer. I went out and talked with my friends. I even did extra reading and extra homework so I wouldn't have to clean up my room. But the last day finally came and I had to move out. And on that day, my parents arrived to help me. And nothing

was done. I can still remember how disappointed they were that I had nothing put away. I had made things harder for myself and for my parents because I had avoided what I was supposed to do. Just like Jonah. Who ran away from what he was supposed to do. He ran away and it caused bigger problems. For the ship he was on. For the sailors on that ship. And for Jonah himself.

And all because it would be hard. That was one reason Jonah didn't want to go the way God asked him to go. But there was another reason Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh because Nineveh was a terrible, awful place. It was the yuckiest city Jonah could imagine. It was the home of Jonah's worst enemies. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the country that had invaded Jonah's own country, Israel. The people of Nineveh had caused chaos and harm to Jonah's people. They had brought violence, destroying towns and families, hurting Jonah's community, his friends, his people. Nineveh was the capital of the most terrible people on earth. Jonah HATED Nineveh.

So Jonah didn't want to go there. He didn't want to go and talk to his enemies. Maybe you can think of time you felt that way. Maybe there is

someone you despise. And you would rather eat moldy broccoli than talk to them. Maybe a bully. Or a bad teacher. Or a friend who hurt you. Or a family member you can't get along with. Maybe one of THOSE people from THAT part of town. Or maybe even bigger, badder people. People who aren't from here; people from another country, from far away. A whole nation of people. People who have hurt us or who might hurt us, who make us feel afraid. Maybe you can think of a people like that, a whole country, a whole city, just like the city of Nineveh?

But that's where God has told Jonah to go. To that terrible city of Nineveh. And Jonah didn't want to go there. He didn't want to talk to those people. He didn't want to give them God's message. Though you'd think he would. You'd think he would want to yell at them and tell them they needed to change. You'd think he would jump at the chance to tell his enemies how terrible they were and how they were going to get it from God.

Recently I went to a group of Muslims and Christians who gather to talk to each other. Folks from both religions come and discuss politics and faith. And the more we talk the more we understand our differences and

all that we have in common. But one man always comes to the group to tell the Muslims how bad they are. He always has this list of things that the Muslims have wrong. And which of their beliefs are misguided. He nearly yells about all the problems that Muslims are causing in the world.

He would have been the perfect guy to go to Nineveh. Him or someone like him, who could point out all the faults of others and God's coming judgment of them. Sometimes people are like that. And sometimes we are like that. Sometimes all we think about is how others are wrong. And we think so much about how others are bad that we forget to be good.

We are so busy blaming others for being mean that we forget not to be mean. We are so hurt, we forget that God wants healing and mercy for everyone. Even if our brother is rude or our parents are grouchy or our neighbors are thoughtless. God asks us not to be that way. God asks us to live a different way.

You'd think Jonah would want to go to Nineveh, just to tell them off.

But Jonah doesn't. He runs the other way. Because Jonah has a hunch about God. He has a suspicion about what will happen if he goes there

with God's message of justice and change. So he runs, and sails away on a boat. But he doesn't get far. Because God needs Jonah to change. And in the belly of that big fish, Jonah understands that he must change.

So after his baptism in fish guts, Jonah goes to Nineveh. He does what God asks him to do. Though very reluctantly. He just barely goes into the city and delivers God's message. Calling people to change, warning Nineveh that God's wrath will come upon them, if they don't. And... the people of Nineveh listen. They listen to Jonah's warning and they believe them. And the news spreads and it gets to their King. And their King listens! And all the people of Nineveh pray and fast and the Bible says, they turned from their evil ways. And God did not bring the calamity that God was planning on their city.

Jonah's mission to Nineveh worked. It worked! His enemies changed. They turned from their ways to God's ways. And you'd think that Jonah would be glad about that. That he would be thrilled with a job well done. His message had changed an entire city of people! But Jonah is anything but happy with the results. The Bible says, that Jonah was displeased and angry and he prayed to the Lord that he might die right on the spot.

Because Jonah knew this would happen. He had had a hunch. Jonah shouts at God. “I knew you would do this! I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. And that’s why I ran away because I knew you would forgive them.”

That’s not the way Jonah wanted God to work. He didn’t want God to be merciful to his enemies. He didn’t want God to forgive and heal and reconcile people to one another. He wanted a God who would punish his enemies and penalize and give his enemies what they deserved.

Sometimes we are like Jonah. We don’t want God to be merciful or forgiving. We don’t want healing or reconciliation. We would rather criticize and blame. We would rather demonize and hate. We would rather talk about how the world around us needs to change. But as baptized followers of Jesus, we say the change begin with us. Not with others. At the baptismal font, WE are baptized. Not other people. We confess how we have been wrong and how God loves us still. We have been mean, but God is still kind and forgiving. We have acted like enemies, but God is still our friend. In Jesus Christ, God’s grace

becomes our grace. In Baptism, God's way becomes our way. And we are changed. Every day, we remember that baptism. Every day, we can be changed.

When we first started the Community Garden, we decided it would be a garden for everyone. We would all work on the whole garden together and the whole garden would be open for anyone and everyone to come and take whatever they wanted. It was a great idea until people started coming to take things. And I admit that there was a part of me that was like, "hey wait, a second! That's not fair! These folks didn't work for this. They didn't weed. They didn't water. They trampled the lettuce and they took almost all the potatoes. They don't deserve this." But I am so thankful for this community that reminds me of my baptism. And reminds me why the garden is there. And who we are and who God is. That God is good and merciful and abounding in steadfast love. That's what this community here is about. It's about us being changed by the extravagant love of God. That's what this table and this meal is about. Healing, Grace, Reconciliation. That's the message God has given us to

give to the world. Things can change. You and I can change. God's love changes everything.