

“The Gospel According to Jonah”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

February 5, 2006

Text: “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’” (Jonah 4: 10-11).

This past month when Pope Benedict XVI issued his first encyclical, “Deus Caritas Est” or “God is Love,” it took many people by surprise. Many expected the document to focus on the “dictatorship of relativism,” which Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) had denounced to his fellow cardinals shortly before his election as Pope.

In this encyclical the Pope addresses one of the most difficult and dangerous aspects of many religious expressions of the world; namely, the claim of truth that does not tolerate other expressions of truth and even advocates the use of violence to suppress those with whom they do not agree. The events of September 11th remind all of us that this type of

intolerance is not confined only to Christianity. But, this kind of intolerance is often practiced by Christians. Several months ago a prominent television evangelist, Pat Robertson, openly advocated the assassination of the President of a Latin American country. Months later Robertson announced that the tornados that occurred in Ohio were the result of God's punishing a town that banned the teaching of the theory of "Intelligent Design" in its schools.

That is what makes this Papal Encyclical so important. The new Pope reminds believers and nonbelievers alike that God is love and that the love of God that God lavishes upon us is also the love we are called to share with other people.

I.

On this mission Sunday we are looking again at a small but significant book in the Old Testament, the Book of Jonah. The Book of Jonah belongs to a section of the Old Testament called the "minor prophets" or the "Book of Twelve Prophets." They are called minor, not because they are unimportant, but because unlike the "major prophets," Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, they are shorter in length.

The Book of Jonah is unique among the prophets in that it does not contain sayings by the prophets, but it is a story about a prophet. The book takes its name from an obscure Galilean prophet from Gath-hepher who was active in the Eighth Century B.C., although its vocabulary and content place it at a much later date in Israel's history.

According to the narrative, God called Jonah to prophesy to the people of the city of Nineveh, which in the Eighth Century B.C. was the capital of the great military power Assyria. This call was a difficult one for this prophet because Jews hated the Assyrians. They were a ruthless, violent people who ruled the ancient world with an iron fist. Israel had felt firsthand their great cruelty.

So Jonah decided he would not obey the command. Instead of going to Nineveh, as he was told, he went to Joppa (Tel Aviv) and purchased a ticket on a ship headed to Spain. Jonah wanted to get as far away from God as possible. But while on board, a great storm came up, and the ship was in peril of sinking. The sailors on the ship were frightened. They emptied the ship of all its cargo, and when that was not sufficient, they prayed to all the gods to save them. During this crisis the captain of the ship found Jonah asleep in the hold of the ship and forced him to come on the deck with the other sailors and passengers. When Jonah finally confessed that he was attempting to escape the God of his people, he finally convinced the sailors to throw him overboard in order to save the ship, which they did. But as the text tells us, "the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights" (Jonah 1:17). During this time Jonah called to God to deliver him from the belly of the fish (Jonah 2: 1-9). "So the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:10).

When God called Jonah for a second time to go to the great city of Nineveh, he did not attempt to flee but responded to God's call. He announced to the people of the city that in forty days God would destroy the city and all its inhabitants for their wickedness.

Then two remarkable things happened. The first was that the people and the king of Nineveh repented. A fast was proclaimed. The people and the king put on sackcloth and sat on ashes as a sign of repentance and guilt. The second remarkable thing that happened was that God repented. He saw that the Ninevites had turned from their evil ways, and so God decided not to bring the punishment on them that Jonah had predicted.

You might have thought that Jonah would have been pleased about this turn of events, but he was not. He was angry with God. He complained to God that this was precisely the reason he didn't want the job in the first place. He knew that God was gracious, merciful, and filled with steadfast love. Jonah had announced that the city would be punished and now God had made a liar out of Jonah.

So, we read, Jonah went outside of the city and made a booth for himself. A tree or bush grew up overnight that protected him from the sun. Jonah likes the bush, but much to his horror, God appointed a worm to attack the bush.

The book of Jonah reaches its climax when God confronts Jonah with Jonah's selfishness and narrow mindedness. Jonah is distressed about a bush that gave him comfort and doesn't care a hoot about a city of one hundred and 120,000 people who are lost in every respect.

III.

Over the years the Book of Jonah has been the subject of an intense debate within the church. Most of the debate has focused on the historical nature of the book. Many of the details of the story of Jonah stretch the credulity of the modern mind. Many people have wondered about the story of the fish (usually referred to as a whale). Many have questioned as to exactly how a person could stay alive for three days in the stomach of a fish.

Moreover, there are many other troubling details in this story. There is no reliable historical record that the city of Nineveh went through the kind of repentance that the story describes. The whole episode about Jonah and the sailors aboard the ship also has a kind of implausibility about it as well.

So, it is no wonder that this story has been a "sticking point" for many people. The trouble, however, is that when you insist on dealing only with the details of the story, you miss the magnificent witness that this small story has to present.

IV.

The first is that the story of Jonah maintains the absolute distinction between the creator and the creature. The Book of Jonah is a powerful reminder of the absolute sovereignty of a God “whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts.” That is the source of Jonah’s rebellion. For him, God is not the kind of God on which a person can depend. God is “gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Jonah knows this. He resents it. For Jonah the issue is not so much that God repents, but for whom he repents. Jonah certainly understood that the history of Israel’s existence was the history of a people rebelling against God and God receiving them back time and time again.

Jonah’s anger is not that God is merciful. He is angry because God is merciful to a group of wicked heathen. The Ninevites were a wicked and violent people and Jonah could not understand why God would put up with that (Jonah 1:2).

Over the years the Presbyterian Church has been closely identified with the doctrine of predestination; namely, that God has chosen a people to be a part of his church and that salvation is not dependent on our actions or beliefs, but it is a gift of God that originates solely in his love for us. For many people this is a difficult concept that brings into question the justice of God. Why some and not others? Is there no freedom involved in our decision about faith? Obviously, other Christian groups have not emphasized this doctrine in the same fashion as the Reformed faith. However, when all is said and done, there is something very powerful in the conviction that salvation is not a human achievement, but it is a gift of God that none of us deserves. The doctrine of predestination--with all the reservations people may have about it--does preserve two essential truths. Salvation comes from God. It is not a human achievement. Moreover, it comes by God’s grace. We do not deserve it and we cannot earn it.

The Book of Jonah makes this clear. God is God and we are not God. God can be merciful to whomever he chooses to be merciful toward--even people whom we think are evil and immoral.

V.

The second word here is a word that reminds us that God is a God of love. Jonah is right. God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. God’s love is an all-embracing love, in spite of all our attempts to limit it. That is why many people have seen the Book of Jonah as the one book in the Old Testament that is closest to the New Testament. It anticipates the ministry of Jesus. It echoes the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal son.

James Denney, the famous Scottish minister, used to hold before his congregation a crucifix with Christ suffering on the cross, and say to them, “God loves like that.” That is

the love of God. It is a self-sacrificing love. It is universal love. There is no life, no sinner, and no person whom God does not love.

That is why the mercy of God always points us to the mission of the church. Because God loves all people, we are called to love them as well. That is why the mission of our church extends itself, not only to the center city of Charlotte, but also to Africa, India, Russia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

And that is why it is important for all Christians to hear the word that Pope Benedict XVI has spoken to all of us. *Deus Caritas Est*. God is love. We love because he first loved us. And because he loves us, we are called to go into the world and bear witness to that love, even to the ends of the earth.

Amen!