

“The Witness From Nineveh”

a sermon by

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Text: “...This generation is an evil generation; it asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” (Luke 11:29)

Why is it “wicked” to ask for a sign?

If I had been a Jew in Auschwitz my every waking moment would have been spent looking for a sign a sign of hope, a sign of meaning, a sign of God’s presence, a sign of his imminent appearance, a sign of rescue. Would such Jews in Auschwitz, aching for a sign, have been the “wicked generation” in that context and not their Nazi tormentors?

When my first grandson was born he needed immediate surgery and spent two weeks hovering in the twilight between life and death. I can tell you, I was looking for a sign. Was that “wicked?” [He is now a strapping, totally healthy 7 year old.]

What are we to make of Jesus’ words from Luke: “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign” [Luke 11:29]?

What makes a “generation” wicked? In the Aramaic idiom of his day, Jesus meant by this use of “generation” simply everyone around; all of you, he is saying; all of us, all of us in the world, are wicked, and a mark of this wickedness is our longing for a sign. Think about that. The *specific* wickedness of which Jesus is speaking is a *generality*. Sign-seeking is not an indicator of my individual wickedness [in the context of my grandson’s birth, for example] it is, rather, a wickedness that the generation exhibits, a social phenomenon, a group expression. Time and time again Jesus responds to individuals who come seeking particular help; the healing of the sick, even the raising of the dead. These surely are, in some sense, “signs” and are thus acceptable. John’s Gospel is constructed around what scholars call the Book of Signs, seven magnificent acts of Jesus ... from the changing of water into wine at Cana to the raising of

Lazarus. It cannot be that “signs” are in of themselves “wicked” nor can it be that my individual asking for one is “wicked.” Jesus is focused on the generation and its asking for one. “This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign” [Luke 11:29].

This makes all the difference, does it not? It also makes it very difficult to decipher the sign. What is the sign our generation is asking for? Is there any remote possibility of all of us, even all of us in this congregation, let alone all of us in Charlotte or the U.S.A., far from all of us in the world, all of us asking for the same sign? What is that sign? Here in the U.S.A. we increasingly hear so much about the divisions in our country, their hardening lines, deepening dislikes and disapprovals that it is, I suggest, impossible to say what everyone across these dividing lines would regard and agree on as a sign, of hope, of meaning, of progress, of social sanity. Thomas Sowell in Conflicting Visions convincingly argues that such agreement is impossible. There will always be two conflicting visions: the constrained with its search for trade-offs, and then unconstrained with its belief in solutions.

What then characterizes “generational wickedness?”

You will have seen on the shelves of bookstores, I am sure, a new trend in titles: The End of Faith by Sam Harris, Breaking the Spell by Daniel Dennert, The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins, and most recently God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything by Christopher Hitchens. These angry, but articulate, authors with various degrees of intensity, thoroughness, and academic honesty, seek together to assert that the root cause of human wickedness is none other than religion itself. As I say, their academic honesty is questionable. For example, as Anthony Gottlieb points out in an excellent New Yorker article, while Hitchens rightly lambastes the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa for its advocacy of apartheid as the will of God and its role in building it up, he fails to mention the central role of the South African Anglican church in demolishing the biblical arguments in support and in tearing apartheid down. There is also something charmingly naïve about these authors: they want to assert that religion has made humans wicked and advocate religion’s abolition, failing to wonder if wickedness lurks somewhere deep within the human heart itself and would soon find some other form of expression.

At any rate, there seems to be no escaping the cold, hard, and unpleasant conclusion: we all must agree that as far as Jesus is concerned “wickedness” is a characteristic of “this generation.” Moreover, at least one manifestation of this wickedness, according to Jesus, is “asking for a sign.” What are we to make of this?

There are two fundamental truths we Christians must grasp; first, we must not ask for a sign, but take the only one we are given, and second, we in turn must become the sign we are given. Let me explain.

Jesus promises that this wicked generation, wicked because it asks for a sign, will indeed be given a sign. The implication is that this sign is not the one they are asking for! It is, he says, “the sign of Jonah.” What is this sign?

Most Christians I ask interpret this as in some way a Resurrection pointer. After all, this is how Matthew portrays it in 12:38-42, the only other place it is mentioned in the Gospels. Matthew has a verse which is missing in or omitted by Luke. Quoting Jesus, Matthew 12:40 reads: “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” This is all well and good. The problem is that if Jesus said this he was wrong! He was not three days and nights in the tomb. The Gospels disagree as to the time of day Jesus died, either at noon or at 3 PM, but they all agree he died on Friday. Let’s say noon, to make it as long a period as possible. We are told in all four Gospels that at dawn on Sunday the tomb was discovered to be empty; let’s say at 6 AM. Noon on Friday to 6 AM on Sunday is 42 hours, not three days and three nights by any reckoning! From Friday at noon to dawn on Sunday means he was raised “on the third day.”

Luke knows this and leaves this odd verse out. He rather directs us to another aspect of Jonah his ministry to Nineveh. You remember how our lesson read? “None will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation” [Luke 11:30.] There is nothing here about three days and nights, no indication to link this sign with the resurrection. You will remember who the Ninevites were: in Jonah’s day they were the implacable enemies of Israel, each hated the other. Called to go east across the desert and minister to them Jonah immediately headed west across the ocean to leave them to their doomed fate. Then came the whale, the vomiting on the beach, and his reluctant, but wildly successful, ministry amongst the Ninevites.

To minister to the Ninevites: that is the sign of Jonah; that is the only sign we are given; it is the sign of God’s people being just that ... God’s people. And who might the Ninevites be? Are they really so hard to identify, so mysteriously hidden that we know them not? Are they not legion? Not only are they who explicitly oppose God, but also those who know nothing of him; not only are they who reject God’s love, but also those who have never been touched by it; not only are they who find God’s hope to be naiveté, but also those who live in deepest despair. The Ninevites are everywhere.

We must not ask for a sign, but take the only one we are given—the sign of Jonah.

But, there is another dimension: when we take the sign we are given we immediately feel it as a summons; grasp it as a challenge; understand it as a responsibility. Communion Sunday is a perfect time to unpack this demanding dimension of the sign of Jonah.

One of the astonishing realities of the Gospel story is the difference in style, emphasis, and even content between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, on the one hand, and John, on the other. One of the most surprising manifestation places of these differences is in the accounts of the Last Supper.

In the first three Gospels, in their Last Supper accounts, we get the familiar story of bread and wine. This story is echoed in the great Words of Institution given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11. They are so familiar that I am sure you will be saying them along in your head as you shortly hear them: “I have received from the Lord what I also delivered unto you; that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread and when had had give thanks he broke it and said...In the same way he took the cup, saying...” These beloved and comforting words lie at the heart, in

the inmost depths of the heart, of the Christian witness. This sacrament is the motivator and motive for the Christian life. Without it, it is hard to imagine how the church could have survived for these two thousand years.

Think of it! In one profoundly true sense we Christians are what we are because of this wonderful, odd, holy, amazing, strange ritual. Without it the church would not be the church. It can be stated this way: we are and we must be the Church of the Table.

How much more stunning, therefore, is the absence of this ritual in John's Gospel. At his Last Supper, told in John 13, there is no bread; there is no cup; no breaking and passing; no sharing and sipping; no body broken for you; no blood shed for you. No Church of the Table. How can this be?

It is not that John's Last Supper is empty. Far from it. The key thing about John is not what is absent, but what is present, not what he leaves out, but what he puts in. You remember it, I am sure.

While they were eating Jesus got up; he took a towel; poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel. Then Jesus says [John 13:13-15]: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

Throughout Church history this has been called the Pedilavium, the foot-washing. Some denominations see in this event even the institution of another sacrament. While we do not go that far, we cannot avoid its summons. "I have set you an example: I have given you a sign!" This summons is nothing other than the completion of the Church of the Table. This summons calls us to be also the Church of the Towel.

"I have given you an example: I have given you a sign;...you shall be given only the sign of Jonah."

The Church of the Towel is the church of the sign of Jonah; the Church of the Towel is nothing other than the sign of Jonah itself.

We must not ask for a sign, but take the only one we are given. More than that, we must become the sign we are given.

We are not given a secret treasure to hoard, but a limitless resource to share. God's love is not for us alone to embrace, but for all the Ninevites to be enveloped in. God's hope is not for us alone to savor as we do indeed "taste and see that the Lord is good," as we embody the Church of the Table. That love and hope are to be taken to all in need of them as we must become the Church of the Towel.

Do not misunderstand. The Church of the Towel does not supplant the Church of the Table, for its very life depends on the nourishment from that table. Nor can the Church of the Table ignore the Church of the Towel for its very purpose is to enable and empower the towel.

“Oh taste and see that the Lord is good Jesus took a towel [and said] I have given you an example;” go and carry that nourishing power to the Ninevites of your life. Where might they be?

Across the desert on the other side of the kitchen table? In the desert of the back seat of the family van? Across the desert on the other side of town in the assisted living home? In the desert of the next cubicle, the office down the hall, the vast expanse of the lonely desert of a crowded street?

Perhaps you see a Ninevite even in the mirage like image in the desert of the mirror?

“Oh taste and see that the Lord is good...Jesus took a towel [and said] I have given you an example;” go and carry that nourishing power to the Ninevites of your life.

[Soli Deo Gloria]