

“Loving Response”

Living by our beliefs can be very difficult. We might believe that lying is awful but we might lie to protect someone feelings. We might believe that stealing is a sin as well as a crime, but look with compassion on someone who steals some food to stay alive. We might find cheating repugnant but when we are in a tight situation we might cheat rather than fail an exam. Life is seldom black and white as much as we might wish it were so. Systematic beliefs can often paint us into corners that we cannot work our way out of.

Take the Book of Jonah which we heard a portion of today. Jonah is a righteous man. So much so that God calls on him to prophesy to the wicked city of Nineveh. Jonah hears God’s call. He heads for the docks to board a ship. However, he chooses to board a ship headed to Tarshish which is in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Jonah does not want to prophesy to the people of Nineveh and he wants nothing to do with saving them from God’s wrath. God being God does not fall for Jonah’s transparent subterfuge. God causes a great wind to come up that makes the waves violent and puts the ship in the peril. The other passengers throw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. They try rowing toward shore. They each pray to their own gods. All to no avail. They eventually find out that Jonah’s avoidance of God’s command is the cause of their strife. Jonah volunteers to be thrown into the sea, but they do not do it. Instead, they all pray to Jonah’s God YHWH for help. Eventually, God provides a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

While Jonah is in the fish he prays to God in thanksgiving that he did not drown. He repents from his “empty folly”, he says he will sacrifice to God, and he says that he will fulfill the vows that he has made to the Lord. It is a powerful and poetic prayer. The result of which is that the Lord commands the fish to spew<sup>1</sup> Jonah onto the shore. After that eloquent prayer and promise to do as he was told, God is not going to let Jonah off the hook. He needs to prove his sincerity and fulfill his vows to the Lord.

God commands Jonah to “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.” Jonah goes. When God said that it was a great city he was not exaggerating. For it is described as a city that took three days of walking to cross. It is a city full of people and livestock. Besides its greatness it is known for its wickedness. God may destroy it as God did Sodom and Gomorrah if the people do not repent.

Jonah walks through the city proclaiming the words God gave him. It is actually a very simple sermon or prophecy. It is, “Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown.” The response of the people was immediate. The people put on sackcloth. The king tears his robes and also puts on sackcloth. He even has sackcloth put on the livestock. He proclaims a fast for humans and animals. The king then demands that all turn away from evil. He believes God may relent from destroying Nineveh if God sees this change. Indeed, God does see the immediate and profound response of the people from lowest to greatest and even the animals. God decides not to destroy Nineveh.

Now if I were Jonah I would be rather proud of myself. He preached one of the simplest and most effective sermons in all of history. Billy Graham, the Pope, and televangelists have even greater crowds hear their sermons and proclamations without

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<sup>1</sup> Many translations read “spewed,” but a better translation would be vomited. Perhaps that was too indelicate for the translators.

such dramatic effect. Jonah did a remarkable thing converting Nineveh to worship God. Yet, his response is to sulk.

He really did not like the people of Nineveh and thought they should be punished. He knew that if they repented God would forgive them, because that is the way God is. In his heart he knew of God's mercy and wanted it for the world. But for the people of Nineveh, no so much. It would be good for them if they got what was coming to them, repentance or no repentance. Jonah is so grieved that he asks God to kill him rather than he have to see the effect of his sermon and God's mercy. It is a rather perverse response.

God decides to give Jonah a lesson through a living parable. God causes a plant to grow up and give Jonah shade where he sits in the sun outside of the city. The plant's shade pleases Jonah. The next morning God sends a worm to kill the plant. Jonah is now exposed to the sun and wind and feels faint. He asks God for death again, this time because he mourns the plant. God points out that Jonah's mourning the plant is contradictory to his lack of mourning for Nineveh.

"Then the LORD said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left and many animals as well!"<sup>2</sup>

I pray we will not be condemned by God for our intellectual inconsistencies in the way that Jonah is. The selfishness of Jonah's care for the plant that served only him, is powerfully exposed when God points out that there are 120,000 people for whom God cares.

We have tough choices to make throughout life. It is hard to be systematic and consistent, especially when the effect of our response on ourselves, those we love, and our pocketbooks will be different at different stages of life. It is a lot easier to be righteous when we do not have any skin in the game. When our beliefs directly affect our lives our resolve weakens.

The Jonah fable argues for us to be less rigid in our stances. To take into account the grey areas as we develop our belief systems. To acknowledge that our personal desires or needs may affect how we act perhaps in contradiction to our beliefs. Most importantly it argues for us to see the world as God sees it. That is as a place of profound beauty, wonder, possibility, and hope. To respond to the world with love even when it makes us uncomfortable. To keep love in mind when we put our beliefs into actions. To remember the words of Bishop Curry, "If it's not about love, it's not about God."

Love for each other even our enemies is the only way. Otherwise strife will plague us all our days. Love God and one another. It is as simple as that and as hard as that. Let's stop struggling against what Jesus taught and start living as he did. Let's be part of the Jesus Movement. Let's start by being real Christians.

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<sup>2</sup> Jonah 4:10-11 JPS