

A Sunday school teacher was proud of her lesson for the day. She thought she had presented the material quite nicely. Summing up, she asked the class, “And what do we learn from the story of Jonah and the whale?” 8-year-old Suzy shot up her hand and said “Always travel by air!” The Book of Jonah is Ripley’s biggest fish story. I remember hearing a fundamentalist preacher on the radio say, “I not only believe that a whale swallowed Jonah, but if the Bible said Jonah swallowed the whale I’d believe that too.” Now if we read that a person swallowed a whale, wouldn’t we guess that we are dealing with some form of literature other than a marine biology textbook? If someone had suggested to the author of this wonderful story that he include a note explaining that this is a parable, the author would have replied: “Give the readers a little credit.” We’re supposed to read this with a smile. Groucho Marx had a line – “Oh, you are from Wales: Do you know a fellow named Jonah? He used to live in Wales for a while.”

This book of Jonah has been described as the comic strip of the Bible. But that doesn’t disparage its message. It simply says that the teaching comes in a different, perhaps more entertaining package. Here’s a ‘Seusical’ version of the book: The word of the Lord comes to Jonah: *Could you, would you go to preach?/ Could you, would you go to reach/ The people in Assyria?/ For you fit my criteria.* And Jonah replies to the Lord: *I would not go there in a boat./ I would not go there in a float./ I would not go there in a gale./ I would not go there in a whale./ I do not like the people there./ If they all died, I would not care./ I will not go to that great town./ I’d rather choke. I’d rather drown./ I will not go by land or sea/ So stop this talk and let me be.* (John Ortberg, ALL THE PLACES TO GO, p. 184)

One of Gary Larson’s FAR SIDE cartoons depicts a bearded man at his front door. He is dripping wet and his clothes are in shreds. His wife opens the door. She looks at the disheveled, bearded man with disgust and says, “For crying out loud, Jonah! Three days late, covered with slime, smelling like fish. And what story have I got to swallow this time?” IN HARPER’S BIBLE COMMENTARY, William Neil describes Jonah as “a man

who is the embodiment of intolerance, bigotry and lack of human sympathy.” Jonah felt about the Ninevites like people do about, say, Muslims or illegal immigrants. The story ends with a pouting prophet sitting beside a withered broom tree as he burns with resentment invites our amusement; and we smile at his immaturity. A grown man behaves like a 2-year-old with a temper tantrum because he has been thwarted. Pathos and humor combine in this book and we are left suspended between fantasy and reality, caught like Jonah in the gap where what we want and imagine is far removed from where we actually are. For this story is our story, bringing an invitation to know ourselves, our mixed motives, prejudices, and childishness as well as our desire to be God’s people, obedient to the divine call. It asks us to be gentle and patient with ourselves as God nudges us again and again toward change by challenging our assumptions and preferences. Above all, it encourages us to step back a little from the blinkered pursuit of perfection that so often prevents us from seeing the funny side of things. The healing potential of humor is extended to us in the wisdom of this little book of Jonah. (from WEAVINGS, Nov/Dec 1994, p. 15, “Of Whales and Wisdom,” Elizabeth J. Cantham). Now we’re getting to the message of the book.

Second, we’ll need a bit more background to get all that’s going on in this strange and wonderful story. The German Pastor, Martin Niemoeller, who protested Hitler’s anti-semitic measures in person to the Fuehrer, was eventually arrested, then imprisoned at Saschsenhausen and Dachau. He was a courageous prophetic voice at a very dark time in human history. But toward the end of his life, Pastor Niemoeller offered the nugget of wisdom for which he is probably most remembered when he wrote, *“It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of His enemies.”*

It often takes a long time to learn the deep truths; not only because they are often not readily apparent, and often counter-intuitive, but also because we can be so clueless, or just plain stubborn. It often seems that only life’s bumps and bruises can soften and humble us enough that we are finally ready to learn them. The book of Jonah is such a deep truth. Jonah took a very long and circuitous route to wisdom. He was

from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had been utterly destroyed by the Assyrians, whose capital city was Nineveh. So when God's call came to Jonah to preach to Nineveh, we can almost hear him protest, "No way, Yahweh! Send me anywhere but Assyria. I hate those people – do you know what they did to our country – they tortured and killed our families, dispersed our tribes into oblivion. I just can't take your word to Nineveh! Can't you send me somewhere else?" And sure enough, Jonah's hatred for Nineveh was even greater than his love for God, so instead of journeying East to Nineveh, Jonah boarded a ship at the port of Joppa, sailing as far West as the ancient maps allowed. Now did you get that? Jonah's hatred of someone was greater than his love for God. That's a very bad place to be – but you hear it all the time from church-going Christians who refuse to forgive someone who has hurt them.

Of course we all know the story – God sent a storm to rock the boat, and then a great fish to swallow up Jonah as he fell into the turbulent sea. It took three long days and nights in the belly of that fish before Jonah finally decided that there were some places one could end up even worse than Nineveh. But even this fish could not stomach Jonah for too long, so when the fish barfed up Jonah on the shore, God met him again, with the exact same commission as before, "Go to Nineveh you ninny, and preach to that great city like I told you in the first place!" (Well, something like that!) This time Jonah got it, perhaps because he did not want to be swallowed by another animal, and perhaps because he was amazed God wanted him after all his failures and disobedience thus far.

But Jonah still had a lot of growing to do. When he got to Nineveh he preached for 3 days, walking across the city with a blazing sermon of doom and hell-fire judgment, scorching the souls of Ninevites like Sherman march to Savannah. It was the lousiest sermon of all time. He didn't spend a whole minute preparing it! There was no opening joke – no 3 points – he would have failed my homiletics class! There was no hope, no mention of God's love or desire for relationship. Jonah probably thought it was the only sermon

the Ninevites deserved. And after deliver this message, Jonah sat down on a hill overlooking the city, the perfect spot to watch the fire fall from heaven on this miserable capital city of the evil empire Assyria.

But that lousy sermon was the most effective sermon of all time. Because fire did not fall, but grace fell instead. SO even despite this flop of a sermon, the people of Nineveh repented, from King down to servants – even the animals repented – talk about comic book! Can you just imagine the cattle and sheep walking around in sackcloth and ashes?! It was the most sweeping revival in human history. Billy Graham would have been jealous! But Jonah was not happy. The book of Jonah ends with this petulant prophet still complaining about God’s acceptance of those he could not accept, and God’s patient and persistent effort to explain that He was not the enemy of Jonah’s enemy, that His love and mercy knew no boundaries. All along, God not only wanted to convert Jonah’s enemy, that His love and mercy knew no boundaries. All along, God not only wanted to convert the Ninevites, He was also trying to convert Jonah. And in the canon of the Old Testament, this small book of Jonah stands as a powerful witness to God’s people, tempted as we are to limit our love and ministry only to those we like, people like us, and then to think God feels the same way we do.

Third, this story has a connection to our gospel believe it or not – that’s why the lectionary planners put these 2 readings together. Here Jesus calls His first disciples, including the fisherman Simon Peter, the one who would eventually become the great apostle, the great preacher, the first pope. But that transformation of the rough fisherman into the polished apostle was a slow journey, fraught with many setbacks and mistakes along the way. Maybe that is one of the reasons we love Peter so much. We can relate to his enthusiasm and passion, but also to his failures, the times he put his foot in his mouth, his slow and crooked path to maturity.

The parallels and connections between Peter and Jonah are quite interesting. Both were called to be preachers, but both had a long journey to become fully converted, or fully formed, into the preachers they were meant to be. Peter, like Jonah, experienced a second-call after his failure, when Jesus met him on the

beach after the resurrection (Jn 21), and re-commissioned him to service, even after Peter had denied Jesus just the week before. And like Jonah, even as Peter began to be a spokesperson for God as recorded in the Book of Acts, with the fantastic revival response at Pentecost, he still had much to learn about just how wide was God's embrace and grace. Once (Acts 10), when Peter was staying at the seacoast town of Joppa, the same town where Jonah turned away from God's call, God called out to Peter in a vision of a lowered net full of all kinds of food, and asking him to eat the food, even the non-kosher items on the menu that Peter had been taught were unclean and unfit. Of course Peter objected, refusing to go near anything unclean. The vision repeated 3 times, and all 3 times Peter objected, as if he thought he could teach God a thing or 2 about kosher law – or better yet, impress God with how he was even better than God! But when the vision ended, while Peter was still scratching his head trying to figure out what the vision meant, he heard a knock on the door from men sent to invite him to preach to a household of Gentiles, in the house of a Roman centurion no less. We need to re-read the book of Jonah – and this ongoing development in the life of Peter – every time someone tells the lie that we need a border wall. As Pope Francis so clearly stated: "Anyone who wants to build a wall understands nothing about Christianity."

The vision of the non-kosher food proved to be a watershed moment for Peter. He realized the vision was another of God's lessons, trying to expand the borders of his heart, to include those he had been taught to exclude, to find a brother in one he had formerly considered the enemy. The Romans had played the same role in the history of Israel that the Assyrians had 8 centuries before. Was it not a centurion who carried out the crucifixion of Jesus? How could Peter preach the Gospel to a Roman centurion?

But Peter went to the house of Cornelius the centurion, and found there a house full of eager and open hearts. And as he preached, at the exact moment when Peter was talking about his own conversion the Holy Spirit fell into the room, and they experienced another Pentecost. Peter was just as astounded as Cornelius, most likely. That moment marked the beginning of the conversion for the Gentiles, but also the continuing

conversion of Simon Peter, the apostle who was introduced to us in the Gospels as Simon Peter, SON OF JONAH (Mt 16:17; Jn 1:42, 21:16). He was indeed. And so are we. My prayer is that we will embrace the deep truth that they did, realizing God has no enemies – and neither should we. Amen. (last two sections adapted from GRACEWORKS, 21 January 2018, p 15-16)

FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY