

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
Salt Lake City, Utah
January 25, 2009 – 3rd Sunday After Epiphany
144TH ANNIVERSARY SUNDAY

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

Mark 1:14-20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

In the words of the old joke, "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who put people into two groups and those who don't." There may be more truth in that than we know. It seems that human beings like to classify things in order to organize our world. What easier way of doing that than to use two groups?

Let me give you an example. I remember as a child watching the westerns on TV and at the movies. I saw Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, the Cisco Kid, Lash Larue, John Wayne, and Randolph Scott playing the heroes. It was a given in each episode that there were going to be good guys wearing white hats and bad guys wearing black hats.

We see the same thing in sports. In Utah, people support the “U” or the “Y” and never the twain shall meet.

We even make this dualistic division into a personal thing. The “Us” are those who agree with me, who are like me, who support the same things I support. I identify with the “Us.” My tribe, my people, is the “Us.”

The “Them” are everyone else. I have little in common with “Them” and don’t like them or have to like them.

Unfortunately, we take this “Us” and “Them” thing too far sometimes. We think the “Us” are the only good guys and all of the “Them” are worthless no good skunks. We think “Us” has all the truth and “Them” are completely wrong in all they say and do. We know that “Us” are the chosen ones of God and “Them” are condemned to eternal punishment by God.

That is certainly what Jonah thought. Jonah was a faithful Jew who probably lived in the middle of the 6th century BCE. Like every other faithful Jew, he knew that God favored Israel and the Jews. They were known as the “Chosen Ones.” They believed that God dwelled in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Jews, and the only the Jews, were the sole nation on earth who knew God’s truth and lived by it. Jonah saw the world in terms of “Us” and “Them,” with the Jews being Us and everyone else Them.

One day, though, God comes to Jonah and instructs him to go to Nineveh and preach. Of all the people in the world, the citizens of Nineveh were more “Them” than anyone else. Nineveh was the ancient world’s equivalent of a superpower. They were big; they had a lot of wealth; they had a strong army; they were a major player in world affairs, especially in that region; and, they

had no need for or contact with God. Now, God instructs Jonah to go there and preach the truth to them.

I can imagine Jonah wanting to go Nineveh and tell them what for. If he could rail at them because they were worthless no good skunks, if he could promise them God's judgment was coming and then watch God zap the city, if he could berate them for all of their moral failings, I bet Jonah would have jumped at the chance.

Lest we be too harsh in our analysis of Jonah, we need to remember that faithful people in many religions had and have the same opinion about "Them." In our early history, our spiritual forebears, the Separatists, identified other religious groups, especially Catholics, as the "Them" of their day. Nothing good could come from a Catholic; no Catholic could be good. And, they did not stop there. Many of the zealous Pilgrims in England wanted nothing to do with the Puritans in England because the latter group was not holy enough.

Even in the history of our own church, such sentiments have been expressed. Our church historians, Louise and Jerry York, provided me with a copy of the sermon preached on the occasion of the public recognition of the First Church of Jesus Christ, Congregational, in Utah on February 26, 1865. You note this is not the first sermon preached for the church, but the sermon when it was recognized as a church.

In that message, the Reverend Norman McLeod, who had been sent here by the Congregational Mission Board, said this: "The lovers of whatever is pure and elevating in principle and fitted to uplift the race to manhood and to unite throughout our broad land will look with growing interest and with deepening expectation as the little church was established on the broad and eternal principles of the faith once delivered to the Saints; and when it is known in the States that the banner of Christ's pure and hope-inspiring principles is given to the air of Utah, and that brave Christian hearts are beating and sympathizing around it, pledged to keep it uplifted, and to make it triumph gloriously, whatever opposition may arise, new hope will be awakened in the hearts of thousands and, for this little consecrated band in the van of Christian civilization,

the prayers of the pure and good will ascend to the God and Father of us all.” Later on, he said, “There is no system of complicated wrong or deep-seated moral debasement now on earth, the concentrated elements of which Christianity has not already met and triumphed over; and it will ever be so.”

Listening very closely to the Reverend McLeod, didn't you hear that echo of the division of “Us” and “Them.” He and his congregation were part of the Us and most everyone else were the Them. That is the way that many faithful folks understand their faith.

Jonah would have been proud to give such a sermon to the people of Nineveh as Reverend McLeod gave in Salt Lake City. He wanted to tell the Ninevites how wrong they were and would have been for that to be his commission from God. Jonah, though, understood a bit more about God than we usually give him credit for. He knew about God's love and forgiveness and was afraid that God would do the unthinkable and actually forgive the people of Nineveh if the sermon worked.

So, Jonah hopped on a ship to Tarshish. You need to know that Nineveh was located northeast of Israel. Jonah was heading west. In fact, he was getting as far away from Nineveh and Israel as he could. We believe Tarshish was located in present-day Spain. Jonah was going to the ends of the earth as he knew it to keep from preaching to Nineveh.

You know the rest of the story leading up to today's reading. The ship hit a storm, bigger than any the sailors had ever experienced before. After tossing all of the cargo overboard, they started to pray, each person to his own God. That is when Jonah acknowledged he was the cause of the storm and told the sailors to toss him overboard to save their lives. They did. After spending three days inside a great fish, Jonah decided to do what God wanted him to do, though he still did not like it one bit.

Once he finally arrived in Nineveh, he walked into the city and then preached a sermon that was only 5 words long in Hebrew. His sermon was blunt. He told the people that in 40 days God was going to destroy the city. Then he

walked out.

The response to this was remarkable. The king called on every person and all the animals to pray to God and repent. When God saw this reaction, what Jonah feared would happen happened. God forgave them.

That leads us, I think, to the truth of the story. It is a truth that we Congregationalists have finally realized and which our church practices. In terms of things divine, there is really no “Us” and “Them.” We may want to divide up the world, but there is really no group or person outside the scope of God’s embrace. Our God is their God. Thus, we say in our covenant that we believe in God who is the God of all people regardless of race, color, or nation.

Dear people of God, having a legacy of 144 years of proclaiming the great love of God is a wonderful thing. Our task is like that of the disciples called by Jesus. We are to go and proclaim this love so that others understand that they too are loved by God. May we be faithful in our ministry. AMEN.