

What if God loves your enemy?

Week 4 Jonah

Pastor Eduardo Bouson

Good morning. Horizons

My name is Eduardo Bouson. I'm the director of school, colleges and universities, for the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church.

Today we are looking at the last, chapter of the book of Jonah. And we are reading from chapter four, verses one through four.

But Jonah thought this and by this is, the forgiveness of Nineveh was utterly wrong.

And he became angry. he prayed to the Lord. Come on, Lord, wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier. I know that your merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it will be better for me to die than to live.

The Lord responded, "is your anger a good thing?"

The book of Jonah brings some really powerful messages to the book. But, as you know that the story of this prophet that is called to go to any event, to preach, and this is very significant, because Nineveh was not a good place Nineveh was, you know, this it was, the capital or one of the main cities of the Assyrian Empire.

The Assyrians are not seen with good eyes in the Bible, not in the Hebrew Scriptures, not in the New Testament. the Assyrians, they, were always taunting, the kingdom of Israel. Well, yeah, the kingdom of Israel that they were later taunting, the northern kingdom. And there are scriptures that tell us about the relationship between Assyria in particularly the northern kingdom of Israel.

You know, we have the story of Elisha, and you probably remember it is, when General Naaman comes to, he has some sort of skin disease and that will completely rip him or rid him from every single, position of power that they may have, they may have had one of his servants, one of his slaves, who had been captured in a raid that he had, that he had organized, suggested for him to go and see the prophet Elijah.

He goes grudgingly. and Elijah says, going washing the Jordan seven times. And Naaman says, how can I do that? There are better rivers, where I'm from, which is true. I don't know if you've been to Jordan's but eventually another of his slaves says, just do it. I mean, what's the deal?

I know, again, a slave that was probably captured, in one of the raids that name and organize, in the kingdom of Israel. Elisha didn't even bother to, to go and see him. but Naaman did. And on the seventh try, the last one, he was clean, and he worship God, but they were so, such a terrible the people that Elisha will not even go and see him, their depictions, I didn't want to bring pictures because they're pretty graphic of the way in which the Assyrians will treat their prisoners and their enemies.

These were violent, bad, bad people. they were so bad that the prophet Amos, prophesies against him. And at the end of the book of Amos, Amos says, you know, when you guys fall and God destroys all of you, everyone is going to stand. All the nations are going to stand and clap their hands. They didn't like the Assyrians and with very good reasons.

The Assyrians eventually intermingled with the people of the Northern Kingdom, and they became the Samaritans. but in some areas, and we know the story about the Samaritans in the Bible, how the Samaritans were seen as less than, as bad people as well, people that were not pure, and it is to this people that the story of Jonah, is about.

It's about Jonah going and preaching to them, for repentance. When we look at the scripture, Jonah's sermon was not about repentance. Jonah's sermon was, the Lord is going to destroy Nineveh, in 40 days. That was it. and I don't know how many times he repeated it. He may have said it under his breath at some point in some corner, and someone heard it.

But the story tells us that everyone repented. The king. Everyone, even the animals, fasted for repentance. and, and here we are. Jonah goes up a hill, sits down. He makes his tent, his pitch assistant, and waits to see what happens. and Jonah is upset at God because he knows that God is going to forgive them because they have repented wholeheartedly.

Jonah was afraid that his word was at stake here. He said that they were going to be destroyed and all of a sudden, they were not going to be destroyed. So, Jonah may be seen as a liar. but I think that mostly he was upset because these people were his enemies. and not just his enemies, but the enemies of his people.

God knows how many folks the Syrians have killed in Jonah's family. God knows how many people, that Jonah knew, have been, kidnaped by the Syrians and turned into slaves. He truly, truly despised them. And we could say that we don't blame him. I could say I don't blame him.

What happens, when God loves our enemies and God is willing to, to forgive. there's, a part of Jonah's, speech to God here that really captures my imagination. because it doesn't start as a way of or with the question God loving our enemies. but he starts with the question of God changing his mind about the destruction that he will come to.

There are two ways of understanding, this text of God changing God's mind. One is that God did not change God's minds at all. But this was the plan for the very beginning, that there are some people who, who when we bring questions like this, can God change his mind? they would say, you know what?

God is God. We are not. God can do whatever God wants. These are the same people who. Who says that, God, chose folks, from even before the creation of the world for salvation and some for damnation. And there's nothing that they can do about it. and really, there's not much of an argument here.

It's like God says, and that settles that and let's move on. Right. as United Methodist, that's not our that's not how we roll. maybe God does change cosmology. and, and God changes the way that God thinks about things that God is going to do. and that change is often affected by love.

There are two examples that I want to bring to you. The first one is from Exodus 32, chapter 32, verses 11 through 14. And this is Moses. God had already destroyed the earth once. and with Noah, and then with the people of Israel. God was really upset because they were they were just, wanting to go back to Egypt.

They wanted to do all these, worship golden calves and things like that. And God says, you know, Moses, I'm going to destroy my I'm going to destroy all of them, and I'm going to start anew with you. just like God did with. No, I'm with Abraham. but Moses pleaded with the Lord his God and said, Lord, why does your fury excuse me?

Why does your, ferry burn against your own people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and amazing force? Why should the Egyptians say he had an evil plan to take the people out and kill them in the mountains, and so wiped them off the earth? Come down to your fears and, change your mind about doing terrible things to your own people.

There's another scripture in the, in the Christian in the New Testament, and this is one of my favorite Jesus scriptures. It's in, Mark 7:24 through, 29, and it's Jesus. And this so, so a Phoenician woman, Jesus. And the story of the woman who was not Jewish. Jesus left that place and went into a region of Cyrene.

He didn't want anyone to know that he had entered a house where he couldn't hide right? In fact, a woman whose young daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit heard about him right away, and she came and fell at his feet. the woman was Greek, so a Phoenician by birth. And she begged Jesus to throw the demon out of her daughter.

Then Jesus says the children have to be first. First using rye to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. but she asked her, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. good answer, he said, going home. The demon has already left your daughter. and I mean, this is one of my first scriptures because here's Jesus and, the person, that I follow, the person that has transformed my life.

He's sitting down having, having this dinner. And he didn't want anyone to bother him, but, you know, this woman comes along and she's not even Jewish. and she asked him to heal her daughter. And Jesus basically calls her a dog. well, not basically, and she responds back. And it was, her faith maybe was that he finally turned and looked at her and saw the, the kneading her eyes and, and Jesus changed his mind and healed her daughter.

At a distance. Because, you know, sometimes when there's food in front of us, there is food in front of us, right? so, so there's this idea that, yes, God does change God's mind. when God is moved by love. there's also the, the approach that we can talk about, that is, maybe the people who wrote the Bible, they're writing about their own experience.

This is not that dictated by God. They're writing about their own experience. And maybe their experience of God is heavily influenced by the context and all that. you know, the context is their experience, the theology, the things that they've been taught. there's a scripture in, in John, that is, that I like to refer to when I talk about this.

It's in chapter nine when, when Jesus, heals the blind man and there's people who come to him and, Jesus disciples ask him, Rabbi, who sin so that he was born blind. This man or his parents, they're understanding the theology was that in order for something like this to happen, he was because someone, somewhere have done something terrible wrong.

Jesus answered, you have it wrong. This is not how God works, neither he nor his parents. This happens so that God's mighty works might be displayed in him. so sometimes when we read, about Jonah, talking about God being, changing God's mind, maybe, maybe that's part of his experience and his theology and the way that he was, brought about, but at the end of the day, God doesn't destroy Nineveh.

God does not destroy Nineveh. and God asks Jonah, why are you so angry? you know the question of what happens when God loves our enemies? I think he needs to be followed with another question. that I think, God was intimating to John as well. what happens when God loves our enemies is to be followed by what happens when we love our enemies?

Jesus wrote about this; Jesus didn't write anything. Actually, he made doodles on the ground. Jesus, said about this and or talk about this. Matthew is the one that wrote about it. I did, in chapter five of Matthew. We have this story that Jesus, looks at the people. He goes up a mountain, just like Moses went up on a mountain and received the Ten Commandments.

Jesus goes up on a mountain and gives, his interpretation of the law. And Jesus says, blessed are the poor. Blessed are those more me. You know, those things. But then, they are followed by Jesus. You have heard that he once said, you must love your neighbor and hate your enemy. This is what Jonah held dear.

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have?

Don't even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters. And what more are you doing? Don't even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly father is complete in showing love to everyone, so you also must be, must be complete.

In 1914, just a few months after World War one, the Great War, broke it was, all of a sudden, it was Christmas on the, on the Western Front, not everywhere, but in some places in the Western Front, on Christmas Eve, the British soldiers began to notice, there were, on the trenches of the German soldiers, which, by the way, they were not that far from each other. They started noticing, that there were some bright lights going on, and they were ordered the, the British soldiers or old ordered, to shoot and they started shooting.

There was no shooting back at them. Christmas Day, they started hearing singing from the German, trenches. And they recognize the hymns. All of this where Christmas Hans. and then there was a white flag, and they stopped the fighting. this is, significant because, the British propaganda about Germans is that these people age children.

They mistreated, women and an elderly, they were evil. They were like the Assyrians. but here they were, singing hymns together. Some in English, some in German. they actually came into no man's land, and they began to exchange, pictures of their loved ones. And they, there are some stories that they engaged in an impromptu game of soccer.

They call it football. There are, they are not actual, one of them writes, or wrote to his wife. my darling sis, we are down for a rest again, and I have just received your welcome parcel and three letters and papers. You will scarcely believe it, but nevertheless, it is true that we had an extraordinary Christmas on Christmas Eve.

The Germans, who hold Christmas in great style, started giving us songs and shouting little bits in English. And of course, we retaliated. And on Christmas Day, the most funny thing happened. We noticed a white flag going off, and then one German getting up on the trench and advanced toward us. And of course, we began to do likewise, as did more of the Germans, and we began to exchange Christmas greetings and jokes and all social and all sorts.

They were giving us cigarettes and drinks and a bit of small gifts and showing us photos of their wives and sweethearts and telling us they were fed up with this war, and I just I love that story. because that is exactly what happens when we love our animals. We come to places where even the people that we hate the most.

Sometimes we may feel like we have really good reasons to despise these people. We come to a place where we see them as equals, as folks that have the same experience to have experienced the same love. Psalm 23 is many people's favorite psalm. it's not mine. so. Okay.

We love to read it. We love to hear it. And I was reading it a few weeks back and it ends with the psalm ends with three images. One of leaving the house of the Lord forever. another one. of them had been anointed with oil. but then, David writes, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

I am sure that our enemies don't see themselves as the villains of our story. In our story, right? They don't see themselves as feelings. They probably see themselves as the heroes of their story. And we are the villains, right? But God prepares a table, a feast for all of us to sit together at the same level, in the same place.

In the Lord is there, and the Lord is there. And this is God's vision for this world. It is not for us to split and divide ourselves into this or that. or that other thing. but it is for us to come together and recognize that when we look each other in the eyes.

Well, first of all, that we need to look each other in the eyes, and we're looking at each other in the eyes or seeing someone that God deeply loves. Just like lots of us. then when we hold hands that when we exchange words, we are seeing the creation of God, the image of God. just like we are God's creation.

Just like we are the image of God as well. in this place, there is no room for violence. at this table. There's no room for harsh words at this table. There's no room for exclusion. There's only room for love. There's only room for love. Jonah may be angry, because God forgave the Ninevites.

Well, you may be angry, for reasons I'm told. but the truth is, that we need to shed that anger, leave it behind, and welcome the love of God to transform us, transform our relationships. Yes, we will disagree. We will picket on different sides of the line. but we love,

That is who we are, because that is who that is. let's bring, in this time, in this place, Lord, where there is so much hatred and violence. where it is easier to find in names. Someone is our enemy. we come before you. and you guide us. to that table where all of us sit together, where we all sit equally at a table that you have sat.

Because it is a table of love. We ask you, Lord, for you to complete us in love. just like you're complete in love. And for us to be able to, even those that we greatly disagree with still see them and learn to love them. because you love them. and because you love us. Be with us, Lord. In this way, in Jesus' name. Amen.