

Epiphany 3, January 21, 2018
Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10
Theme: Exclusive Club: Sinners Only

Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh. None of God's people really wanted to go to Nineveh. Imagine if God called you to go to ISIS and proclaim his demand for repentance. How hard would that be? If God came to me tonight and said "Go to ISIS and tell them to repent of their sin!" I would be very tempted to check flights for Arizona. It's a desert. It's sort of like Syria or Afghanistan. I'm sure people there need to hear the word of God too.

And what if ISIS repented? What if God forgave them and we no longer had any reason to ignore them or be angry with them. Every society likes to have a common enemy whom we can all agree to hate and blame for all our ills. What if we had to forgive them for all the terror and heartache they had created? What if they started coming to our church and worshipping alongside of us? Imagine a bunch of women with burkas sitting in the pews and men with little carpets bowing east but praying to OUR GOD! How irritating would that be? You think you're ok with all that? How about Charles Manson or Adolf Hitler being in heaven? What about that? Are you ok with spending eternity sharing a pew with Adolph? We go to heaven not based on what we do but based on

what Christ did for us. We can be the most reprehensible, horrible people on earth and still waltz right through the pearly gates if in the end we have faith in Christ, and no one knows who has faith and who does not except that person and God.

The book of Jonah deals with our frustration with God's grace. It is easy to revel in God's grace when we secretly believe that we're fairly good people. Oh we might have an occasional violation of the second commandment (that's taking the Lord's name in vain for all of you who were not paying attention in confirmation). We might gossip now and then about that one person who nobody likes anyway, but it's true! It's not like I'm making it up. I'm just making it public so that everyone can enjoy dragging his name through the mud. We secretly think we're pretty decent people and while none of us would be so audacious as to suggest that we deserve salvation, we can certainly think of dozens of people who deserve it less than we do!

Jonah was no different from us. The people of Nineveh had made their bed and they could sleep in it by golly. And then God went and forgave them. Jonah was not happy with this turn of events and he told God so. But God will be God and God is love. He loves not just people who love him back but he loves those who hate him as well – maybe even especially those who hate him.

Which child do you give the most attention to? The one who has it all together and seems to be doing just fine or the one who is a wreck and cannot decipher his elbow from his...well....you get the picture. Our God calls everyone. Our God loves everyone. His grace is for everyone.

This is why, at Trinity, we strive to be welcoming to everyone God sends us. Everyone is welcome here. We are not discriminatory against certain kinds of sinners but welcome all sinners. In fact, the only requirement for admission to our club is that you are a sinner. People who are well have no need for a physician, and people who are sinless have no need for Christ. But, if you are sick, if sin is eating you alive, you are exactly who we are fishing for. We are fishers of people who are sick with sin. Why? Because we have the cure! We have the medicine that forgives sin and heals souls. The body and blood of Christ mysteriously and miraculously works and soon, you will begin to feel better, stronger and able to start fishing yourself. Just beware. As Jonah learned, the fish only get bigger and more difficult to land. There are no minnows in this pond, but nothing is as satisfying as reeling in a really big fish and knowing that you are doing what God has created you and called you to do.

The bottom line is that we are never looking to condemn. Condemnation is really lousy bait. Love is our bait: our love as empowered by God's love. We are always looking to love, no matter what, in hope that the love of God will change the lives of people who are lost or disconnected from him, for remember, the people of Nineveh were once God's people too. They descended from Shem, Noah's son and somewhere, someone lost his way and wandered off. The people of Nineveh are just like the people in your families or on your block who once came from God's people, who maybe were even Baptized, but they have lost their ways. Now they never come to church or read their Bibles. They may not even know that they are God's children and that he loves them dearly, so dearly that he gave his son to die for them on the cross. And if they know this, they certainly have forgotten the power of their Baptisms and the need for feeding their faith. Only his Word will help them. Only the Body and Blood of Jesus will heal them. They are disconnected from God and swimming around in a hostile world. Bait your hooks with love and compassion and get to fishing.