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Who's Your Ninevite?

a sermon on Jonah 4

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

Who is your Ninevite? Who do you think does not deserve God's mercy? Who is the person that if God said to you, "I want you to go sit by this person, share a meal with this person," you would tell God, "No"?

I marvel at the power of the gospel to reconcile people. At the presbytery meeting last weekend, a guy was in my small group who is involved in Kairos Prison Ministry. Kairos grew out of Cursillo, the spiritual renewal weekend many of you are already familiar with. Kairos is led by laypeople. They reach out to prisoners and their families with the gospel. This guy ministers on death row. He has met, face-to-face, every man on death row in the state of Alabama with just a few exceptions. A few are so dangerous the state won't let him see them. A few don't want to see him. All the rest, he has sat down with and talked to about Jesus Christ.

He told us about a couple whose son was murdered. They were Christians. As time went by, they decided they had to forgive the man who killed their son. They made the necessary arrangements and went to meet him. They found a young man about their son's age. He was repentant, remorseful. They forgave him. They began to visit him. Eventually he was paroled. The couple *adopted* him. ... Isn't that insane? It's either crazy ... or it's nothing less than the work of God! They haven't come to regret it. In Christ they all found the power of new beginning. I marvel at the power of God to reconcile people.

I also marvel at the power of stubborn people to resist God's grace. There was a church, a small country church, full of nice, loving people. If there was one thing they excelled at it was caring for people. Not just members, either. If there was a need in their part of the county, they got on the phone and mobilized and in no time a task force was on the ground with casseroles, clothing, school supplies, or whatever was needed. Two older women in the church were particularly active. If anything stirred at the church, they were there. Always helping, always doing good deeds. Giving generously. Always kind and gracious. ... *Except to each other*. You see, these two saints would not speak to each other. Somewhere deep in their past, they had fallen out. Decades had passed. Whatever had caused the hard feelings, no one knew. Only the oldest members of the congregation could have known, but if they did, they weren't telling. Neither were the two women. Whatever the cause, the shunning was mutual. Neither would speak to

the other, and no amount of preaching helped. Every minister who came took a crack at reconciling them. Every minister failed. It became one of the dynamics of the church, something everyone took for granted and basically just worked around.

I ask you: How can the gospel reconcile a murderer and his victim's parents? How can it reconcile a concentration camp survivor like Corrie Ten Boom with her Nazi guards? How can it make a hard-core Pharisee like Paul love Gentiles? How can it reconcile bitterest enemies through the ages, but it cannot reconcile two kind old ladies who sit in the same church worshipping God every Sunday?

Jonah hated the people of Nineveh, and I don't blame him. They were the Nazis of their day. They were the terrorists who ruined lives. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria, and Assyria was the nastiest empire in the ancient world. They were also, unfortunately, very powerful. They sent out their armies. An Assyrian army would show up outside a city and offer the inhabitants a choice: Surrender or fight. If the town surrendered, the Assyrians would plunder everything of value and enslave the people. If the town fought, the Assyrians would slaughter, torture, rape, and pillage. The lucky people would be those who died in the fighting. You can see why someone like Jonah would hate the Assyrians.

Jonah was from the northern kingdom, Israel. In 722 B.C., the Assyrians conquered Israel. They deported the population, and that was the end of the northern kingdom. That's how the so-called ten lost tribes of Israel got lost. The Assyrians moved them to other places, and they eventually blended into the populations there.

Jonah had good reason to hate the people of Nineveh. He was right to consider them dangerous enemies. He didn't want anything to do with them. So when God told him to go to Nineveh, he ran in the other direction. You know what happened. The storm at sea. The big fish. Given a second chance, Jonah goes to Nineveh.

You have to give Jonah credit for consistency. Whether he was disobeying or obeying, he operated from the same motive: to get God off his back. Maybe he thought, as he entered Nineveh, "Isn't this just like God, to send you to the last place you want to go? To make you be with the last people you want to have anything to do with?" That is like God. How many preachers have testified, "I told the Lord I would go anywhere but ..." insert the name of the place they live. This is a well-founded fear most Christians have. "If I take Jesus too seriously, he's going to make me do things I don't want to do. He's going to make me be nice to someone I would rather avoid."

In days gone by, scholars and preachers would argue with one another about whether the book of Jonah is actual history. Like any big fish story, it sounded suspicious. Some wrote it off as obvious fiction. Others claimed it *could* have happened, and pastors explained to their patient congregations about certain species of fish and the size of

their throats and all that. What a waste. I can't decide whether the book of Jonah is a historically accurate account or if it is a parable, like the ones Jesus told. But my confusion has nothing to do with the fish. If you believe in a God who created the whole universe from nothing, who became human and died on a cross, then rose from the dead three days later, it seems to me a big fish would be easy for a God like that. What I find hard to believe is the wholesale repentance of Nineveh. That would have been the greatest revival in history. Also, I don't believe the question God asks at the end is for Jonah at all. It is for us. The story of Jonah ends the same way Jesus' parable of the Prodigal son ends. In Jesus' parable, the older, faithful son complains to the father. The father explains, then invites him to join the party. Then Jesus ends the story, without telling us what the older son did. Why? Because we are the older son! The story finds its ending as we decide our attitude toward Jesus. The book of Jonah may be historical, but if it is, it is told as a parable. It stops abruptly with a question, and leaves us to provide the answer.

Jonah plays his part perfectly to set up the all-important question. When Nineveh repents, and God forgives them, Jonah gets angry with God. "Why did you forgive *them*? They don't deserve your mercy! This is exactly why I didn't want to come in the first place: You are too merciful, too forgiving. They aren't worth it! If I were God I'd smite them until nothing was left but a big, smoking hole in the ground!" Good thing for all of us Jonah isn't God. But then again, neither are we.

God gave Jonah a shade tree, and this made Jonah happy. Then God destroyed the little tree, and Jonah was angry again. This sets up God's question, the one intended for us more than Jonah: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" ...

Who's your Ninevite? Whom would you smite if you were God? Is there someone who, if you never had to see this person again, you would be happy? "God please, don't tell me you want me to love that person ... to be at peace with that enemy ... please don't tell me that. I'll be a missionary in a hostile country. I'll plant churches. I'll double my giving to the church. Just please, not that. Not that person. Don't make me do it."

Mark Buchanan in his book *Your God Is Too Safe* tells the story of a Korean pastor by the name of Paul Yonggi Cho. I trust you know some of the history between Japan and Korea. There was bad blood for centuries, with Japan invading in the 16th century and again in the early 20th century. Japan annexed Korea in 1910, and only Japan's defeat in World War II reestablished Korea's independence. The Japanese occupation was oppressive to say the least. Koreans suffered much at the hands of the Japanese, and to

this day many Japanese consider Koreans inferior, and many Koreans hate the Japanese. Pastor Cho was one of them. During the war Japanese troops had been cruel not only to his fellow Koreans, but also to members of his own family.

He offered to go anywhere God wanted him to go. He would speak the gospel and love anyone at all. Except in Japan. ... You see where this is going. It took God a long time to break down his defenses. Finally he surrendered to what he knew to be the will of God, and he went to Japan to speak to a pastor's conference. Over a thousand Japanese pastors came to hear Pastor Cho. There he was, with the enemy. He got up to speak – to speak the gospel of Jesus Christ – but what came out of his mouth was, "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!" Then he broke down and wept.

You can imagine the scene; in those cultures emotions are always kept tightly in check. The shared embarrassment must have been profound. But one of the pastors got up, went to Pastor Cho, got down on his knees, and asked forgiveness for what his people had done. This first penitent was quickly followed by another and another. One by one they all came forward, every last one – over a thousand of them. And as they came, God changed Pastor Cho's heart – and set him free! Gone were the hatred, the resentment, the bitterness. In their place, he was able to say from his heart, "I love you! I love you! I love you!" ... That is the reconciling power of the gospel. That is the healing power of Jesus Christ! ...

God loves us freely, unconditionally. He gives us grace. By the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross, he has reconciled us to himself. In fact, he has adopted us as his own children. You and I both know, however, that the new life we have in Christ takes a distinct shape. We can no longer live however we want. Not because God is obsessed with rules, but because his love makes us beautiful. He wants you to be like Jesus. And being like Jesus means letting go of the hurt, the resentment, the prejudice, the pride, and all that stuff. Being like Jesus means embracing that person you do not like. It means loving your Ninevite.

I know this doesn't seem fair. It is not a burden I would put on you. I'm more understanding in some ways than Jesus is, because he loves you more. I do love you, but where I am willing to overlook your little quirks and blemishes. Shall we admit I'm talking about sin? Little bits of that old, sinful self you cherish down deep in your heart? Where I am prone to give you a pass, Jesus says, "Nothing doing! You've got to change!" He loves you too much to settle for anything less than perfect beauty in you. And I guess I do too because I am preaching this sermon.

The command to love your neighbor, even your mean, ugly neighbor, comes from God. Because God loved you when you were a Ninevite, and because God loves all Ninevites everywhere, he wants you to love them too – especially your particular Ninevite, that one person or group you want to spit on and be done with.

Let me ask you a question about Jonah. I keep coming back to Jonah because I think we can identify with him. *Is God a poor judge of character?* Scripture claims God knows us completely. He knows how many hairs are on our heads. He knows the thoughts and desires of our hearts better than we do. I believe that. I hope you do too. But if this is true, how can we explain God's choice of Jonah to be his prophet to Nineveh?

Jonah was unwilling and bitter. He no doubt went about his task like sullen teenager who doesn't want to mow the lawn. He complained when God sent him, and he complained when his preaching was successful. If 120,000 people repented and turned to God in one day because of my preaching, I'd be thrilled. Not Jonah. He criticized God! God knew Jonah hated Nineveh. God knew Jonah's heart wasn't in his mission. So why did God send Jonah? I can't believe that in all Israel there was no one more qualified or suited to the task. I'd wager 80% of the population was better suited than Jonah was. So why did God send him?

Because God loved Jonah. God looked at Jonah's heart and saw a Ninevite – no, someone worse than a Ninevite. Those wicked Ninevites didn't know their right hand from their life, morally speaking. Jonah should have. He had the Law of God. He knew the One True and Living God. But his heart was full of selfishness, pride, and bitterness. Chock full. It was eating away his soul. He was so far gone that 120,000 people could rot in hell, and he would be happy; but "God, don't hurt my little tree. That's my tree. I like it."

So God said, "I'm going to set Jonah free. I'm going to make him beautiful. At least I'm going to give it my best shot. I won't force him, but I will open his eyes. After that, whether he opens his heart is up to him."

Did Jonah open his heart? ... I don't know. You tell me. *You are Jonah!*

I don't know who your Ninevite is, but I know who you are. You are Jonah, and so am I. God wants to set us free.

One last thing ... Jesus once said, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Your worship suffers when you hold onto a grudge or prejudice. Your relationship with God suffers when you hold back his grace, so that it does not penetrate to all your relationships. You want enough grace to put you right with God, but not so much that it causes you to embrace your Ninevite. The problem is, of course, that the grace required to reconcile you with God is more than enough to change your heart toward your Ninevite. So it's kind of a package deal. Loving God means loving your neighbor and your enemy. First John 4.20 says, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and

hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

We don't offer sacrifices anymore, but we do something that celebrates God's reconciling love for us. We call it "the Lord's Supper." I believe that Jesus' instructions concerning an offering apply to the Lord's Supper. If you come to the Table and remember that a brother or sister has something against you, you should go set things right with that person.

We are not celebrating the Lord's Supper today, but we will next week. Consider this your advance warning. You are going to sit at Table with Jesus Christ himself, and he is going to want you to be right with your neighbor. You have 168 hours to take care of business and get ready. There's no excuse for coming next Sunday and only then remembering someone you need to talk to. Think about it now. Take care of it this week. Then come next Sunday ready to eat and drink with a glad and joyful heart.

So what's it going to be, Jonah? Are you going to let God heal you or not? ... And ... who's your Ninevite?

rev_mauldin@yahoo.com