

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 25, 2009
Lessons: Jonah 3:1-10; 4:1 and Mark 1:14-20

WHOSE PURPOSE AND WHAT IS IT?

Religion offers us many *would-be prophets*, people who want to believe or want others to believe they speak for God. The story of Jonah presents us with a *would-not-be prophet*, a man who runs from God's call the first time and answers it the second time only because he feels compelled. Jonah's story is amusing, and I think is supposed to be. Like much comedy, however, it's purpose is best served when, laughing at God's stubbornly reluctant prophet, we laugh also at ourselves. Here we have a man who tries literally to run away from God. Many years ago, I read the account of a man stopped by the police for driving away from a toll booth at over a hundred miles an hour. His explanation? The world was coming to an end, and he was getting away.

What is Jonah's problem? What makes him resist God's call and, when he at last fulfills the prophetic task, end up sitting under a bush and pouting about the results? Jonah's problem is that he knows God, and what he has suspected all along would be the outcome of his mission has indeed come true. Jonah feels God has made a fool of him by sending him to proclaim judgment and doom upon a city, then forgiving that evil city when its inhabitants and its king repent and turn from their cruel ways. Jonah's gripe to God is, in effect, *See, I knew you'd do that. I knew that if they took my warning seriously and repented, you'd forgive them. So, what was it all about? What was the point of predicting the city's destruction if it then failed to come true? The city's still standing. I wasted my time and acted the fool. Are you satisfied now that you've made a fool of me in front of everyone?*

The absurd selfishness of Jonah's complaint is the story's message. Jonah thinks his call from God is all about him and his success in the prophetic task, which he misunderstands as being right in his prediction of the future. God never sent prophets to predict the future. God sent prophets to change the future by turning the minds and hearts of people bound for their own destruction. Prophecy is an intervention, not a crystal ball. *The prophet's job is not to be right but to be redemptive.* God does not want the prophecy of doom to come true. God wants the warning to produce truth by turning the people back from their dangerous path. Prophecy is an intervention because God so loves the world.

Laughing at Jonah is good for the soul because Jonah is a mirror for Israel, for the church, for anyone with a calling from God, anyone with the self-understanding of having

a mission or a ministry from God. The minister who cannot laugh at himself or herself, who cannot joke about the “high calling” but can only revere it and try to insist others revere it as well, that minister is like Jonah playing the fool. Likewise the church that takes itself too seriously. It is not Jonah’s calling to be right about God’s judgment upon the evil city. God loves the evil city and has no wish to destroy it with all its children and even its animals. Jonah thinks his call from God is all about him and about some objective truth he can possess and proclaim. God’s truth is redemptive love. The church is not called to be right or to keep itself pure in its beliefs and in the morals of its members. The church is called to intervene in this world with God’s love and mercy, which means the church must be, think, believe, and act in the manner of God’s love and mercy. If as Christ’s church, we hold any truth that does not belong to God’s love, we need to get rid of it before it corrupts us.

God has no truth but love. Understand, God’s love is not gushing sentiment; it is not the child-adoration of the parent whose little darling can do no wrong, because that’s just egoism that cares more for self than for the child so selfishly and harmfully adored. But prophecy is never a matter of just delivering the word and letting the chips fall where they may. The prophet who does not love the people is just a blowhard. Love is not contemptuous of people, does not regard them as disgusting or stupid things, and does not write them off as hopeless or unworthy of compassion. Love enters into the conditions of suffering with the people. That’s what the Incarnation of God’s Son means. God has entered into the conditions of suffering and shame in our world. God loves the world enough to die for it.

The church has a calling to ministry and service, and each of us has a calling within the context of the larger calling of the people of God. That the church is not only a people but also an organization and even an institution challenges us to keep distinguishing Christ’s call from institutional self-preservation and organizational enhancement. The decline of the mainline Protestant churches that began, as far as I know it, in the mid 1960’s and continues to this day tempts us to fear and distress. On the other side of that same coin, the explosive success of the church growth movement tempts us to distort Christ’s call into blueprints and tactics for organizational self-enhancement for the sake of organizational success as such. That’s wrong, and on the day of our Annual Meeting as a church organization, we do well to affirm the wrongness of *church-for-its-own-sake*.

When Jesus calls his very first disciples, he tells them from the outset that their discipleship is a process turned outward to the world’s people. They who have fished for a living will now fish to turn people to God so that life is healed and quickened with the Spirit of God. I know “quickened” is a strange word, but it means animated, enlivened and made vital. It does not mean speeded up – we have enough of that in our frantic world. Jesus has come to breathe life into our human existence, to strengthen sagging spirits and vitalize dulled minds and aching hearts. *Come alive!* Jesus says in a whole variety of ways to a dying

world. Stand up, get up, walk, run, come out of hiding, lift up your heads, shout and sing, find each other so you can find yourselves, seek the God who loves you so you can love yourselves in the right way that is healthful and stands open to friendship and love for others.

There is nothing wrong with a church's being organized; certainly, it is better than being disorganized. I have to smile a little inside when people speak dismissively of "organized religion," because there is no other kind unless it is the private whimsy of one person sharing faith with no others. Wherever two or three gather together, there needs to be some organization, at least some coordination. What I think people mean and what especially the young react against is religion that is organized for its own organizational sake, where people exist for the church rather than the church for people. God called Israel and loves Israel for the sake of all nations and peoples, not just Israel. Jesus Christ called disciples and loves the community of faith for the sake of all communities and all people, not just Christians. We are called to God so God's Spirit can turn us outward with that grace which *extends itself* and also *expends itself* for the sake of others.

The irony of grace is that the more I try to serve myself, the more of my true self I lose. But the more I let go and let myself care about this world, this community, and their people, the more I am, secretly perhaps, finding my truer self and coming more alive. That irony is true for a church as well as for an individual. The church that exists for itself dies no matter how large and vibrant it grows; it dies inside. The church that lets Christ turn it outward with his grace and starts to give itself for others gains life, even if it shrinks in measurable numbers. This way of measuring by love and service is not an excuse for apathy or laziness in the faith. But sometimes a humbling such as the mainline churches are experiencing these days can awaken us from the stupor of self-sufficiency and turn us anew to God, so Christ can turn us anew toward the world he gave himself to redeem for God.

This also I believe we learn from God's word and Spirit: because God loves the community and its people, not the organization and its numbers, every person called to faith is called also to ministry and service. God's purpose is that of love and love's desire to reach out, embrace, heal, restore, and vitalize. People need to know that's what God's purpose is and to experience its truth, its reality. To redeem with love and mercy was Jesus' purpose, and now it is ours. That's why we are called together to be a church: not to be righter than right can or should be, not to be successful and prosperous as an organization, not to be an exclusive club for the saved or the elect or the pure or in any sense the "right people," but to give ourselves in grace as people called to ministry. Amen.