

Sunday, July 31, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "The Reluctant Prophet"

Oh Jonah. What a character.

What a movie this story would make.

Our human story is amplified – our shortcomings are spotlighted.

The time of this story, following the Jewish exile in Babylonia, was a time of both trauma and regeneration of the Jewish communities. The Jews had been driven out of their homeland, and there was a real possibility that the people, living as minority groups, throughout the Near East, would be assimilated into the neighboring populations.

Although they were permitted to return to their homeland after the exile, there was strong concern with maintaining traditional covenantal values and identity as God's holy people over against the melting pot of the vast Persian empire.

Many Jewish leaders believed that the only safe course of action was to maintain separate and distinct communities.

Another concern of the times was God's treatment of non-Jews. The Jewish people had accepted the idea that their exile was a result of their breach of covenant with God. However, once they got out into the larger world and saw people who behaved much worse than they had ever dreamed of, doing fine – their beliefs came into question.

Jonah's distress at Nineveh being saved is caused by what he perceives as God's unfair treatment. Why would God spare the Ninevites and exile the Jews. Why should "those people" be entitled to God's grace and mercy while "Jonah's people" were subject to hardship and struggle.

Jonah is a whining prophet.

He has been given the power and authority to prophesize, but rather than heeding God's call, he wants to call the shots.

He believes that he knows what God should do.

The writer of Jonah is poking fun at the prophets who say they are speaking for God, but are actually trying to move their own agenda forward.

Does this sound familiar? Can you think of any circumstances in our world today where people are saying that they represent one thing, but are actually trying to accomplish something quite different?

Does the US Congress ring a bell?

We are a smart, educated population.

We know what is good for us and we know what is right.

Why then, do we have so much trouble adhering to the principles that we espouse?

When we look at scripture, from Genesis all the way through Paul's letters, the one recurring theme is care for the poor, the widow and orphan, the lame, the infirm.

The only thing that Jesus talks about more than caring for others is not being beholden to money or other false Gods.

The prophets warn, Jesus commands, Paul explains....yet still we don't get it.

We make up our own set of rules for playing this game we call life.

Walter Bruggeman, in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination* says "The purpose of the prophet is to bring hope to public expression, to return the community to its single referent, the sovereign faithfulness of God."

A single referent!

Can you imagine if we truly returned ourselves to a single referent – the sovereign faithfulness of God?

What if all of our decisions, including economic policy, was predicated on answering the question, "Is this what God is calling us to do?"

I have just returned from spending one week at the Chautauqua Institution.

Chautauqua was founded in 1878 as a Christian learning community.

A group of people over 125 years ago made a commitment to try and live in community according to Christian values.

From the beginning the challenge of Chautauqua has been to be a center for the identification and development of the best in human values through programs which encourage, stimulate and promote excellence.

These early families built houses, meeting halls, and worship spaces on a beautiful twenty-two mile lake.

They worked to provide an atmosphere where people were honored and respected – where they could gather to explore the intellectual issues of the day.

The list of speakers over the years is noteworthy ranging from Eleanor Roosevelt to Karen Armstrong.

Thomas Edison's father-in-law was one of the founders.

While I was there Barbara Lunblad, Homiletics professor from Union Seminary in NY was the preacher in residence.

She helped us to explore what the scriptures are saying to us in today's world.

The theme of the week was "Women transcending boundaries" and we heard from a host of speakers, two each day, from all over the world.

We heard United Nation's policy makers who are working to empower communities throughout the world by educating and empowering women.

We heard from women from Kashmir, Somalia, Israel and Nigeria who are working in their own poverty-stricken, war-torn environments to build better lives for their native people.

A few weeks ago I asked you “who are the prophets of our time?” These women, taking on the power structures in their own countries spoke to us as prophets.

Rev. Lunblad characterized them by saying, “Prophets are not those who predict the future, they are the ones who call attention to the challenges we face today.”

We heard the story of a group of women in Israel who are trying to secure the right for women to pray at the Western Wall.

They have asked the Supreme Court to grant them one hour a month to pray out loud, to read the Torah, to wear prayer shawls, Talits, in public.

They have been denied.

We heard about individual women in Kashmir who are taking on the religious fundamentalist and demanding that they be given access to education and health care.

We heard about Muslim women who are reading the Koran for the first time and reinterpreting the text that has been used to subordinate them for centuries.

We heard from a doctor in Somalia who single-handedly has developed a small civil society of 100,000 people surrounded by a country torn by 20 years of civil war.

These women, each powerful in her own way, reminded us that change is possible.

They reminded us that even when the odds are overwhelmingly against you, that if you persist in what you believe, have faith in your God, you can change the world.

There was rich diversity in our “new clergy group.”

We ranged in age from about 30 to 60.

We were serving churches ranging in size from 14 to over a thousand.

We were rural, and urban, Mennonite, Episcopalian, Lutheran and Baptist.

We were black and we were white.

Our dialogue was rich and riveting.

We listened to the speakers and then tried to discern what their international concerns meant for us in our local situations.

Throughout the week, I learned to adapt to living in an environment where people genuinely trust and respect one another.

It was incredibly relaxing to be free to wander the property without worrying about infringing on someone else’s space.

Rooms were left unlocked.

Neighbors shared internet access.

Children rode bikes to the center for ice cream.

There were no cars! No traffic noise, no horns.

People were generally quiet after the evening concerts.

It was idyllic.

I think it was how Nineveh was after their conversion.

Jonah told them that God was going to destroy them if they didn't start to behave.

They believed him and even the animals changed their ways—total transformation of a community.

When Ninevah changed, Jonah couldn't believe it.

He had always thought of “those people” as evil and unchangeable.

When he realized that the enemy had been saved by his God, he pleaded with God to let him die.

He would have rather died than live in a world where “those people” were benefactors of God's grace.

As I listened to the speakers at Chautauqua this week and reflected on Jonah's story, I couldn't help but wonder how the world would respond if widespread change were to occur.

What if the peace we pray for every week actually came to pass?

What if all of the people suffering from hunger were fed?

What if we learned to accept one another's differences?

What if, throughout the world, we forgave those who trespass against us?

Could we do it?

Would we be willing to surrender our sense of supremacy to live in peace?

Could we embrace the idea that “those people” are our brothers and sisters, created in God's image?

Could we celebrate another's success without measuring it against our own?

I believe that this is what we are called to do. It is hard. We have no precedence.

But if we want to live in a world that nurtures our children and nourishes our souls, we must open our hearts and our minds to people different from ourselves.

We must reach out, across all boundaries – local and international – and identify ourselves as co-creators in God's kingdom.

If we say that we believe in forgiveness, mercy and grace we have to live as if we do.

Let's talk about this.

Questions

1. What would it take to let go of the “us/them” mentality that currently prevails?
2. Are we able to truly see people from other parts of the world as our brothers and sisters?
3. Does another's success undermine our own sense of power?
4. Who are the Ninevites in your world?