

“The Church Not City Hall!”

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(Jonah 3)

Third Sunday After the Epiphany

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Our Scripture lesson this morning invites us to a revival. So let's have a revival, a revival of our church's biblical identity, of our ability to take ourselves seriously as Christians, and to employ the unifying beliefs and practices of our faith, a faith that makes us a political entity apart from city hall (Hauerwas, *In Good Company*).

Look at the way we do church in America today. We have a “SUCCESS” mentality, but Jesus asks us, “ARE YOU FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH?” What if our success is hidden in the form of how well we bear the cross and how often we stand up for the poor? **John Howard Yoder** says, “The challenge to [the church] should not be to dilute or filter or translate its witness, so that the ‘public’ can handle it without believing, but so to purify and clarify and exemplify it that the world can perceive it to be good news without having to learn a foreign language.”

In the British musical, “**Beyond the Fringe**,” an Anglican clergyman tries to reach two un-churched young men. He tells them they can come and join the church without believing. “Nobody believes that God stuff any more.” Then he says, “You don't have to call me Vicar. Call me Dick.” The confused young men say, “OK Vicker.” Then they sing, “If you know something we should know, if you believe something that we should believe, then tell us but don't try to win us that way.”

And is there any idolatry more pernicious than church as individual Christians who come and go as they please, believe as they please, and hang their spiritual hat on the church peg along with other disconnected, disembodied, and mystical souls? It is as if church exists in outer space with the individual members zooming around incognito and uninvolved, and docking with the mother ship on Sunday for a couple of hours.

What I'm appealing for is the revival of the church as church rather than as an imitation of the culture. “The difficulty is that the church is constantly tempted to imitate the false politics of the world for its own life” (**Stanley Hauerwas**). Imitation may be the most sincere form of flattery, but it's death to the church. If the church is going to survive as a viable entity, its future is in recovery of its essential **identity** not in its continued **imitation** of the culture.

And there's a biblical model for us in the OT book of Jonah. “The word of the Lord came to Jonah a **second time**.” There's gospel in the words, “a second time.” How many of us can say, “Thank you, Lord, for the gospel of a second chance.”

What happened the first time? A scared preacher. A scared preacher is useless to the church. On his way to Memphis, Martin Luther King said, “We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now, because I have been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody I would like to live— a long life— longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now; I just want to do God's will....So I'm happy tonight! I'm not worried about anything! I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!”

What does God say? God says, **“Go to Nineveh.”** Perhaps the mind of Jonah filled with the choice: Tarshish or Nineveh. Cold in Nineveh. Warm in Tarshish. Dangerous in downtown Nineveh. Safe in the suburbs of Tarshish. Now, Tarshish functions as a spatial metaphor. It stands for any place where people evade the call of God.

Remember how Jonah, with the ship to Tarshish flailing in a typhoon, was thrown overboard by superstitious sailors and swallowed by a big fish and left for dead for 3 days. Sounds just like church. If there’s trouble, fire the preacher. Make what you want of the big fish story, but Jonah went through the darkness of the soul. Rehab therapists say that a drug addict can’t be helped until they hit bottom. Well, Jonah hit bottom. Maybe God can’t change a church or a city until God changes the preacher.

Turns out a preacher gives even a big fish indigestion, so he spit Jonah out on dry ground. After his rehabilitation, Jonah accepted God’s second call, but he still doesn’t agree with God’s strategy. He wanted Nineveh to burn not turn, punished not prayed over. Condemn not convert. Destroy not deliver. Jonah stands for all the angry Christians who want revenge on the wicked not their redemption. Isn’t it ironic that a church that refuses to practice discipline on its own members wants to be God’s agents for disciplining the rest of the world? Let’s declare an end to the current Christian crusades in America and get back to being church for the world.

So what are God’s instructions? **“Get up, go to Nineveh, and preach some judgment.”** Go tell Nineveh, you have forty days. GOD SPEAKS A WORD OF JUDGMENT TO THE CITY AND HE HAS HIS PREACHER DELIVER THE MESSAGE. A church speaking judgment to city hall? Do we see why a church needs integrity? We have to say, “You have forty days.” In the Bible forty days stands for a long time, but not forever. It has about it a sense of urgency. A new president has his “first hundred days.” Well, we get “forty days and forty nights.” But don’t despair. In forty days, Moses produced Ten Commandments; Jesus whipped the devil at his own politics; Elijah traveled across wilderness and climbed the mountain of God; and a resurrected Jesus empowered a scared, weak, and locked-behind-closed doors church to become a church of power and might. First Baptist this is our FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS.

It is not easy to speak a word of judgment to a people that we are always trying to impress and imitate. As the "Hoosier poet" **James Whitcomb Riley**, put it: "When I see a bird that walks like a duck and swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck." So if a church walks like the world, talks like the world, acts like the world, and swims with the current like the world, that church is a worldly church.

The most authentic thing the church can do today is to be the church – to live together as a worshipping, confessing, forgiving, enemy-loving, nonviolent, compassionate, and inclusive body formed into Christ’s body by word and sacrament” (**Bryan Stone**, Boston University School of Theology). We aren’t called to be mimes but missionaries. We aren’t called to be imitators but agitators.

We should pay more attention to putting our own house in order, because according to reliable reports, the church is dying. But brace yourself. If the church is dying, we might as well die for the right reasons. Thomas said, “Let us go and die with him [Jesus].”

My struggle at this point derives from a growing conviction that there are church practices that we have abandoned that should be recovered. Bryan Stone says, “That which makes

the church truly evangelistic are those disciplines, practices, gestures, worship, and saintly lives that constitute the church as the body of Christ.” Why, for example, has the church abandoned evangelism? We say we believe in evangelism, but we don’t speak the Gospel to anyone outside the church. **David Buttrick** has observed that we have turned over evangelism to the Pentecostals, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. And, we have also surrendered evangelism to the Muslims and Hindus.

And we have buried church discipline as a Christian practice. The Rotary Club has higher standards of membership than the church. Why belong to what we don’t care about or believe in or support? A novelist said, “I wouldn’t want to belong to a church that would have me as a member.”

I stopped for coffee at the Night and Day Café Thursday morning about 6:15 and four men were sitting around with open Bibles in their laps. Unable to resist the sight of people with open Bibles in a public space, I said, “That’s dangerous stuff you are reading.” I asked them why. One of the guys said, “We get together to hold one another accountable.”

In the movie *Defiance*, the leader of the Jewish resistance appeals to the leaders of a Jewish ghetto to escape. He tells them that he can give them a day or a month or a year of living as free human beings. What is worth living for is also worth dying for. Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, in a nationwide broadcast took on the junta of his country: “I implore you, I beg of you, nay, I order you, in the name of God, stop the repression!” Within a week he was shot dead in a church.

When will we learn that the world tolerates us only to use us? Don’t be deceived. The world looks down its nose at people of faith. The time has come for recovery. Make like Moses, Daniel, and Jesus.

So I say, O Lord, give us a church whose members believe that we are a new society that actually has power, actually is the household of the living God, actually does possess the Word of Truth, actually does know more than all the rest of the world, actually does have good news to offer to the nations, actually does know and practice the will of God. Give us a church that acts in consistency with its convictions. Give us a church with courage and ego integrity. Give us a church of spirit-filled people with passion to do whatever it takes for the good of the church and the world. Give us that kind of church!