

January 21, 2018

“Going on to Perfection”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 1: 40-42; The Book of Jonah

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Our second scripture comes from the book of Jonah – in fact, it is the Book of Jonah, paraphrased and read by our guest liturgist, Mary Margaret Douglas.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4VrujheblY>

Wasn't she wonderful? Maybe you can get her as your next pastor when I retire. But, seriously, this story of Jonah has implications for us. Because we hear in no uncertain terms that our God is a God of second chances. And that is the good news! But first I want to digress for a moment and talk about our Gospel story today where Jesus cures a leper. Here was a man suffering from an ailment that makes his physical being imperfect. And he says to Jesus, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Jesus responds, “I am willing...be made clean.” And we’re told, “instantly, the leprosy disappeared.” “I am willing. I am willing.” I love when I hear Jesus say that because it basically sums up the kind of God we have, doesn't it? A God who is willing to put up with us and love us unconditionally, a God who is willing to shower on us his infinite mercy, a God who is willing to forgive us time and time again, and a God who was willing to prove it by being nailed to the cross and dying for our imperfections.

You know, often when we think of our imperfections, we tend to think of some physical flaw or personality issue. Bodies no longer working well, looks that have deteriorated, perhaps a character trait that some might consider strange. But we tend to overlook our spiritual flaws and imperfections – our lack of faith and trust in God, our un-Christlike thoughts and attitudes, anything that makes us sin against God. Yet these are most important to correct because they affect the way we live our very lives, and our standing before God. Now granted, “Nobody is perfect,” as the saying goes. Nobody – and we’ve certainly discovered that over the past few months, haven't we? And guess what? Neither was God's prophet Jonah. He too, was an imperfect human being. Let me tell you why. You see, the Jews and the Ninevites really hated each other. The Ninevites were an evil empire, so to speak. Yet rather than destroy them, God, in his mercy, calls on Jonah to go to them so that they might repent. However, “Thy will be done,” wasn't in Jonah's repertoire. But being faithless was. As was the spiritual imperfections of being hateful, judgmental, self-righteous, and more. And so Jonah turns his back on God, is disobedient, and tries to run away from God. And because of this, for a period of time, Jonah

finds himself shipwrecked and ends up in a terrible place. Obviously, the storm and being swallowed up in the belly of a big whale symbolize all those turbulent and dark places that we find ourselves in when we try to run and hide from God. Think about that for a moment.

But Jonah finally realizes the bad place he's gotten himself into, and comes to his senses. He bows humbly to God in prayer, and he is given a second chance. He is made clean, so to speak. And so he goes and does God's will, preaching repentance to the Ninevites. And they do repent and turn from their evil ways and God offers them a second chance as well. God willingly pours out his love and mercy and forgiveness on them. But there's more. Because while it first appears that Jonah has succeeded, the truth is that again, Jonah has failed God. He becomes angry at God because God spared all those undeserving and imperfect souls living in Nineveh. And so he goes outside the city, sits down and effectively pouts. And all those spiritual flaws of Jonah's we spoke of earlier, dirty him up once again. But God reminds Jonah that his love and forgiveness and mercy is for all people, just as it is for even the imperfect Jonah. You see, Jonah is given still another chance to be made clean. What a wonderful message of hope and assurance that is for us.

Because isn't it true – we all, in fact, have spiritual imperfections. For isn't it easier to hate than to love. Easier to hold a grudge than to forgive. Easier to judge rather than show mercy. And, because of that, some of us have created our own city of Nineveh. And the people that inhabit our "Nineveh" are perhaps those of a different social or economic background, perhaps they're homosexuals, or those with a different political view, or perhaps it's an ethnic or religious group we're uncomfortable with, whomever or whatever. So the danger we must honestly consider is this: does our self-righteousness or intolerance or sinfulness cause us, like Jonah, to be disobedient to the will of God? We can learn many lessons from the book of Jonah, but the thread that connects them all together is the love and mercy and forgiveness of our great God. We see it in God's pursuit and restoration of Jonah, his sparing of the sailors, and his miraculous salvation of Nineveh. Also, in full view is the spiritual imperfections of Jonah, who experienced mercy but gave none; who received love but returned none; who benefited from the patience of God but resented God for showing that same patience to Nineveh.¹

So the bottom line of today's lesson is how do we respond to this kind of a God. Because we, like Jonah, can't hide from God. The Psalmist says, "Lord, you have searched me and known me. You

¹ "The Failure of Success: The Story of Jonah" by David Sper

know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, Lord, you know it completely.” And so, since our Almighty God knows everything about us, doesn’t it make sense for us to come, like the leper, to Jesus Christ saying, “Lord, make me clean.” “Lord, make me clean.” Think about what is it that needs to be cleansed in your life. Where do you need a second chance? Yes, our spiritual life is an ongoing process. John Wesley said, that as Christians, we are constantly “going on to perfection.” Being cleansed, changed, renewed and molded into the image of God. He is a God that hates the sin but loves the sinner. And that’s why he is willing to give you and me another chance... again and again and again and again. Amen.