

Loving to Hate

Our passage from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning is from one of the shorter books found in the Bible, not the shortest, but still it is only four chapters. Most of us have been familiar with the contents of the first chapter from very early in our Sunday school days. Even those who did not attend Sunday school probably know at least the outline of Jonah and the whale. Much has been made of the efforts of Jonah to avoid obeying the Lord to go to Nineveh. Reading it this morning at almost the same time we read in Mark of Jesus' call of those four fishermen plying their trade by the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the contrast in response is stark. In Mark the response is to immediately leave what they are doing; to leave everything behind and to follow Jesus at just that simple invitation: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." When we think about our own response to the call of Jesus in comparison, it seems they have set a very high bar to reach. We don't think of ourselves as being like Jonah and going in the opposite direction. Of course we can always point to places later in the narrative where these disciples of Jesus had responses that were disappointing, but as a first example for us it is quite daunting and somewhat annoying. We often think that we can't really be called to give up everything. When Mark recorded this story of the call of the first disciples, do we believe that it was set down as an exact example for us to follow? And if that is so, then how do we follow? Of course we know that it's no longer possible for us to follow the historical Jesus—that would not have been possible even for Mark's first readers. Perhaps Mark's message to them and us is more about following Jesus in general than about any following him by leaving everything behind to proclaim the coming kingdom of God. Except in reality we can never follow Jesus "in general". We each follow Christ in particular and distinct ways that may or may not in any way resemble the actions of those first disciples. There are any number of distinct ways to follow Jesus. And that, I think, is the point. Perhaps we follow by becoming a teacher. Perhaps we follow by doing volunteer work at church, in a school or at any number of organizations which strive to minister to those in need. Perhaps we follow by listening to those around us and responding with encouragement and care. There are any number of distinct ways to follow Jesus with the individual gifts we have been given. And in these ways we can follow him immediately like those first disciples. That is the heart of the issue of following Jesus. We follow precisely by trying to imitate him—by trying, that is, to treat others with the same regard, love and patience that he did, including all manner of people but especially those who were overlooked by society. To be a Christian is to try to live and treat others as Jesus did, embracing the values of inclusiveness, love, forgiveness, and healing that he showed in word and deed. Be careful to remember that in doing this you are being a Christian, not becoming one. We are invited into the Christian community by faith and the grace of God, not by any merit of our own. But to be a part of that community we need to try to live into the identity that we have been given—to try to be Christ-like. I think one of the hardest teachings of Jesus for us to follow is that we are to love and forgive our enemies, those that hate us or hurt us. It's that definition of who we are to consider our neighbor. And that brings me back to the story found in Jonah. Within the Hebrew Scriptures there are also many call stories. There is Moses and the burning bush where the Lord introduces himself. Last week we read about the voice of the Lord calling to Samuel

that first time. Although he did not recognize that it was not Eli but the Lord who was calling, when he understood who was calling his name his response was: "Speak, for your servant is listening." The story that the book of Jonah tells is not of a first calling but of an assignment given to Jonah. Chapter 1, verse 1: "Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of A'mit'tai, saying 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.'" In the days of Jonah, the city of Nineveh represented the center of evil and brutality and cruelty. It was the capital of the Assyrian kingdom which had ruthlessly conquered much of the ancient near Eastern world including the home of Jonah. Nineveh was to Jonah what Babylon and Rome would be in later times. It was a city that any Israelite would love to hate. You would think that Jonah would relish the thought of the Lord destroying it. Of course, enjoying that idea of destruction and going there to tell them about it are entirely different things. In fact, Jonah does not respond to the Lord's voice in an obedient manner— instead he buys himself a ticket on a boat going to a destination in the opposite direction. He tries to go to Tarshish. Clearly Jonah is not like Peter, Andrew, James or John leaving whatever he was doing and following the command of the Lord. Unlike Moses going to Egypt with nothing but a shepherd's crook and his brother Aaron, Jonah heads away from where the Lord is sending him. This is the part of the story that is very familiar to us. The boat trip turns into a nightmare for Jonah and the sailors. The storm rages and when the sailors discover Jonah's part in their problem with the storm, they agree to cast him overboard. You would think that Jonah realizing the cost of his disobedience would repent and promise obedience. But rather than obey the Lord, he is prepared to drown. He really doesn't want to go to Nineveh. However, it is not in the Lord's plan for Jonah to die. After spending three days in the belly of a great fish, Jonah prays to the Lord. Despite Jonah's disobedience God hears the prayer of Jonah and the fish casts him up on dry land. This is the point at which our passage for today begins. It seems that Jonah's reluctance to warn Nineveh has not changed God's mind. Nineveh is still to be warned. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah, despite his best efforts to the contrary ends up going to Nineveh and walking the streets to declare God's impending judgment on his enemies. Our passage tells us that it takes three days to walk across the city it is so large. So Jonah begins by walking into the city for a day, and then he cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." That's quite a short sermon consisting of only five Hebrew words. It does not actually say anything about why the city is going to be overthrown or by whom. The Lord's name is not even mentioned. Yet we are told "the people of Nineveh believed God". The news spread and even the king of Nineveh responded with a proclamation that all should fast and put on sackcloth and ashes showing repentance. That all should pray to God and change their evil ways. Were Jonah's words so brief because he thought that was all that Nineveh needed to hear in order to change their ways? Or did he think that if he just walked through the city proclaiming that message it would be enough to satisfy the Lord command. Did Jonah believe that a brief message like that would be the minimum needed to follow what God had called him to do but would leave the city unchanged? Remember, what Nineveh represents to Jonah. It is the capital of Israel's enemy. What Jonah really wanted was for God to destroy Nineveh. Yet with his minimalist approach Jonah was the most successful prophet in the entire canon of Hebrew scripture—his words turned an entire city to the ways of God. And Jonah hated it. Because the last verses of our

passage tell us that “when God say what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it” In the verses of chapter 4 which follow our passage we discover that Jonah complains to the Lord saying, “Is this not what I said while I was still in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” Jonah did not want the Lord to care about or show mercy to his enemies. Jonah had finally obediently declared God’s judgment on this city he hated to its inhabitants, but then God changed his mind and instead extended grace. God didn’t share Jonah’s opinion of what should happen to Nineveh. God cared for those people despite their wickedness. No matter who the party or person is, God is always willing to extend grace and mercy. Often we share Jonah’s view of the world. It is all very well for God to be forgiving and merciful to us, as shown by God’s multiple relenting in the matter of Israel’s punishments, but when God’s mercy extends to those who we hate, to those who are different from us, to those we consider wicked—do we like that? As we come into God’s presence, it is vitally important to remember that God’s ability to do what is incomprehensible to us; to remember that it is God’s extension of mercy to the least deserving that opens the door to our own hope of redemption. God’s mercy is from everlasting to everlasting. Cycles of violence and blame in our world can only be broken where mercy is extended. Like Jonah, we often find that following the Lord leads us in a direction where we don’t want to go. Jonah did not flee toward Tarshish because he feared going to Nineveh. It is not God’s judgment that represents the most lethal threat to the serious plans and principles we contrive to keep the world in its place. It is God’s mercy toward those we love to hate. We are called to give up our very human desire for God to “smite the wicked.” We are called to love that neighbor who we do not know. We are called to be a follower of the one who from the cross said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Amen.