**January 21, 2018**

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20**

These are honeymoon stories. In these small parts of much larger stories, everything went so smoothly that it was downright boring. As Paul Harvey would have said, this was not *the rest* of the story. The rest of the story has all the drama. The rest of the story has tragedy and disappointment, temper tantrums and egotistical crises. But for here, for these moments, all was well:

*Jonah* went to Nineveh because God told him to do so. Jonah told the people that they had sinned and done wrong in the eyes of the Lord. The people said that they were sorry. God forgave them. All was well.

*Jesus* went to Galilee because God told him to do so. Jesus repeated Jonah’s and John the Baptist’s message that people should repent and change their lives. Some fishermen heard his invitation and decided to join him. All was well.

Both Jonah and Jesus were in the business of evangelism. They both left their homes to tell strangers what God was doing in the world. Both were well received and finished with positive results.

It’s interesting that the “**good news**” they both proclaimed was actually an invitation to repentance. Both Jonah and Jesus warned people that the kingdom of God was near. It was time – now or never – to change their behavior and believe… (pause) This probably sounds like strange good news to you. Call it what you will -- repentance or confession – this is not something that we generally think of as *good* news. Confessing our sins, recognizing our bad deeds, and realizing our inadequacies are unpleasant tasks. They force us to look at the part of ourselves that is not pretty or glamorous in any stretch of the imagination. Confession is an examination of our broken pieces and bad parts, the squeaky wheels, and old, dried out and flaky, crusty and oozing, discolored and stinky parts of ourselves. So that repentance is an activity that increases our self-awareness, for there is no way to hide the truth of what we are: sinful creatures.

In the secular world, a sense of disgrace often accompanies confession. Criminals sit with their heads low, ashamed to look their victims in the eye. Politicians stand in front of the press with their eyes glued to their statement, unable to look up or answer questions. It’s not easy to admit that we’ve been bad. It’s difficult to say that we’ve done something wrong. Children and adults both cry when we admit our fault, especially when we know that we hurt someone else. Whereas pride builds us up, confession and repentance keep us honest and humble. Instead of pretending that we are always right or able to do things our own way, confession admits that we are actually wrong, and dependent on others to straighten us out and carry us through to right-ness and wholeness and more.

So why is God’s *good news* about repentance?

Different from everyone else in the world who wants perfection and prettiness, it’s good news that God wants us in our unadorned, natural state. Without our theological hair and makeup done. For if God only wanted the best of us, God’s *good news* would be a secret to be kept under lock and key for only the most insistent and deserving disciples. But that is not the biblical witness. That is not the history of God’s work in the world. Instead, God calls people to come as they are. God calls people to turn away from their shame and turn toward grace. Theologian Beldon Lane, wrote that “divine love is incessantly restless until it turns all woundedness into health, all deformity into beauty and all embarrassment into laughter.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This sort of *good news* is unbelievable when we consider the scale of disgrace within humanity. Knowing the broken and sorry parts of ourselves, and seeing glimpses of that within others, we find that God calls a real mess to be disciples. We all live in assorted states of disarray, with various troubles, and yet God still wants us. God does not call people to repent so that we can get better before we meet God, but to repent so that God can give us the gift of grace; confession is not for the sake of confession. Confession is for the miracle of forgiveness. For the Ninevites, for the disciples, for us, and for the world. It’s good news. Unbelievably good, generous, gracious, miraculous, abundant good news for all of us sinful, broken creatures.

Because this approach to confession is so different from the world’s way of dealing with wrong and shame, many struggle to accept God’s invitation. Many do not believe that God actually wants them. We come up with all sorts of reasons why we aren’t good enough – we have doubts, we don’t know enough, we don’t help other people, we don’t love ourselves, and on and on and on. We can’t escape the shame of our basic condition, and yet we are all suffering the same dis-ease and the same condition.

Mother Teresa once told a room of lepers that they were loved by God and a “gift to the rest of us.” An older leper raised his hand respectfully and asked if she would repeat that. “It did me good… would you mind just saying it again?”[[2]](#footnote-2) That is how good this *good news* is! That each week when we hear the call to confession and assurance of pardon, we would want to hear it again: that God wants us. God calls us. “Repent and believe. The kingdom of God is at hand.”

With such good news, we are grateful for the Ninevites’ and the disciples’ opportunities to turn and follow God… And then it is our turn to do so. We cannot hear the story and blithely pass it by. We must respond, taking seriously the invitation to repentance, as well as the accompanying gift of grace. But we cannot do it on our own. We need one another to hold us accountable, to remind us of Christ’s teaching, as well as our best intentions. Christian community is here to accept us and encourage us, despite the state of ourselves and souls.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu practices accountability and confession and forgiveness within the community. “*Ubuntu*” recognizes that our humanity – the good and the bad – is bound with others. This philosophy fueled the reconciliation process after apartheid, when human rights’ abusers were called to public repentance, and guaranteed grace. Person after person participated in nationally-televised hearings, faced their victims, and instead of receiving a prison sentence or other punishment, each was forgiven and sent back to their homes. The process acknowledged each person’s harm, and each person’s need for grace. The process celebrated the good news of confession and repentance, and the power of forgiveness.

One tribe from Zambia practices *ubuntu* by gathering together and standing around someone accused of wrong doing. Instead of shaming them with words and insults, or retelling their misdeeds, the people tell the accused the good things they see within that person, and the sacredness that they know that dwells deep within them. So that after doing wrong, instead of being pushed farther from the love and sense of belonging, instead of living in shame, instead of being defined by their brokenness and sinfulness, they are redefined by grace and forgiveness. The truth of who they are meant to be resounds through the village.

Our own country and community would be transformed by practicing confession and forgiveness this way. When a church experienced conflict, we would recommit to community, confessing the ways that we contributed to the problems, instead of entrenching in the idea of “being right” or running away to the false freedom of division. Instead of ranting on Facebook, we would name the fear that prompts such outbursts, and remind one another that God is almighty and all loving. Instead of sharing a meager amount of our time and resources with others, the community would point out our abundance and compel us to live generously, sharing all that we had, so that others would be fed from our plenty, learn from our experience, and grow in our kindness.

To do so, we need the Triune God’s presence and guidance and grace. So we pray “Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art— Thou [our] best thought, by day or by night, waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light.

1. Boyle, Gregory. Tattoos on the Heart. Free Press: New York, 2010. pg 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. pg. 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)