



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for August 23, 2020
“Inside Out: Reluctance”
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Jonah 1:1-3

Near and Far

Last week Ashlee asked us, *“If the church is not missional, is it a church?”* We all knew the answer to that question the second she asked it. A church, if it is truly a church, will always be missional. Its gaze will always be *“out.”*

Dr. Leonard Sweet offers this on the subject. He says, *“Now, I like a nice airport terminal. I like a nice place to eat, a clean restroom, a place to sit down and rest a bit. Those things though are not the reason a terminal is in place. The main function of an airport terminal is to get people out of there. That’s what the church’s function is as well.”*

Roger Swanson, who for years was the head of evangelism for the General Board of Discipleship, reminds us that *“the church exists for the people who are not a part of it.”* He’s right, you know?

Last week our focus was on that great passage from Acts 1:8 where it says, *“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

In a word, we are call to be witnesses of the good things God is doing in our lives. The scope of that effort stretches near and far.

I like to think of that in terms of concentric circles—circles that are close, not so close, those that are faraway.

What are those circles for you and who inhabits them?

A Word about Jonah

Today we read from the Book of Jonah. Most know Jonah as the one who was swallowed by a big fish. The Book of Jonah is one of the more far-reaching books in the Bible and certainly in the Old Testament. Some have called it a bridge between the Old Testament and New Testament. Others have characterized it as one of the more evangelistic books in the Bible.

Jonah himself was more than just a guy swallowed by a big fish. He was a man who struggled with God’s call upon his life. Jonah wanted to be obedient, but not in ways God wanted him to be, which, if you think about it, is not obedience at all.

If we look close enough, we see ourselves in Jonah. His hesitancy to respond, his stubbornness in dealing with persons outside his comfort zone, and his desire to go his own way paint a picture that looks too much like ourselves.

Jonah was challenged to re-think things, just as we are. Jonah was challenged to re-consider how he viewed the world and those who made it up. He was challenged to view all people as God views them. We'd do well to do the same.

Let's read then just a bit from Jonah and get a glimpse into the reluctance he had in responding to God's call upon his life. While we are only reading a few verses this morning, I encourage you to take out your Bible this afternoon and read the entire book. You will not only be blessed, but challenged.

Jonah 1:1-3

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

Resisting the Call of God

Let's be honest with one another, God's call upon our lives is not always easy and, at times, not very convenient. We are so used to working things into our busy schedules that God has to be worked in as well and because of that he is often times left wanting.

In another life, my brother was in the heating and air conditioning business. It was not unusual for him to get a call from his friends and on occasion a few family members, if you know what I mean, to come during the night or on the weekends to fix what wasn't working. He got tired of that pretty quick.

I remember a call he got from a friend who asked him to come fix his refrigerator. I have never forgotten his response. *"I'll get back with you next week on that."* I guess he thought a refrigerator full of food could wait.

There have been countless times when the opportunity to reach out or to offer a witness doesn't so much fit my schedule. I am one to have my days pretty well filled with a lot of things going on. The Covid-19 Pandemic has changed that a bit and in the mix of all the adjustment I am learning to leave myself more open to the opportunities God places before me.

Failing to do that leaves me guilty of doing my own thing rather than God's thing. Think about it, an interruption to an otherwise already busy schedule may be the very thing God wants us to tend to.

Why Are We So Hesitant?

Why are we so hesitant when it comes to sharing the faith? Why are we so tentative?

It could be that we are making a statement about God and his ability to work through us. Remember, whatever God calls us to do he stands ready to equip us and see us through. It could be that we are hesitant about involving ourselves in the lives of other people, particularly those who are different from us. That alone should give us plenty to think about given our present circumstances.

Let's face it there is a lot of risk to ministry. Ministry is not always cut and dry. It involves investing in the lives of other people, which sometimes doesn't always work out so well. It is so much easier, so much safer to keep others at arm's length. Just like the priest in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it is so much easier, so much safer to walk on the other side of the street.

There have been countless times in my life when I have passed right by someone in need thinking I had something more important to do.

The Call Remains

The call remains. There is no escaping it. We can run, but we cannot hide. That's the way it is with God's call. God is the creator of all that is. There is no place we can go where he hasn't been or doesn't know about.

The scripture records that Jonah heard God's call, but resisted it. Jonah even tried running away. Instead of heeding the call of God, Jonah high tailed it out of town. He wanted to get as far away as he possibly could.

The scripture is clear, "*Jonah ran from the Lord.*"

He jumped onboard a ship headed for Tarshish, a mining town along the coast of Spain. In a word, Jonah would have rather dropped off the face of the earth than bring the word of God to Nineveh.

God, though, stayed in hot pursuit of his unwilling evangelist, just as he stays after us.

As we all know Jonah landed in the belly of a great fish and it was there that he had the opportunity to work a few things out. It was there in the belly of that fish that Jonah heard the word of the Lord a second time and he was pointed yet again to Nineveh.

The interesting about the Ninevites is that there was no love lost between them and the Jews. In fact, the two despised one another and Jonah being the good Jew that he was couldn't begin to fathom that God wanted him to go to Nineveh, much less preach there.

Where is Nineveh for you?

What about You and Your Witness?

Who do you need to be reaching out to? Who in your circle of influence needs to hear a good word from you about Jesus? Who around you would benefit from a word of encouragement? Who around you needs some help? And to borrow from the Book of Jonah, are there any "*Ninevites*" you need to touch base with? Do you have a burden for those people or are you content to simply turn the other way?

Given our present circumstance, there are people all around you—near and far—who would benefit from hearing a good word about God from you. Let me encourage you to write down the names of those people, pray for them, and follow up as the Lord leads you.

Remember this: God identified the very people he wanted Jonah to speak with. He will help you do the same. What God needs from you is an open heart to his leadership and a readiness to follow that leadership.

Carrying a Burden for Others

The call for your life and mine is to carry the same burden God has for all people. One of the more revealing things about our spiritual lives is whether we carry that burden, and if we do, whether we act on it regularly.

A bit earlier we commented that if we are really honest with ourselves we will see ourselves in Jonah and discover that we are much like him. How about you? When it comes to offering a witness are you more prone to run or go where sent?

If you're more prone to run, there is no time like the present to do a little soul searching and you don't have to wind up in the belly of a fish to do that.

God has always had his Jonahs. They are the ones who hear his call, but run from it as quickly and as far away as they can. God has also had his Isaiahs, those who stand ready to heed the call.

God asked in Isaiah 6:8, *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"*

Whereupon Isaiah responded, *"Here I am. Send me!"*

The question comes. Who are you?—a Jonah or an Isaiah?