

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

If you were going to support a foreign mission, what qualities would you look for in a missionary? Dedication and commitment to his cause? Love for the Lord? Love for the people he serves? If these were some important qualities you wanted to see, then you would not choose Jonah. Was he dedicated? No. The first time God called him to go to Nineveh he ran away in the other direction. It took three days in the belly of a fish to change his mind. Did he have love for the Lord? No. Choosing to disobey God is not love. Did he have love for the people he was called to serve? No. When the people of Nineveh repented of their sin, Jonah became angry. He actually wanted God to punish them.

But on the other hand, if you were wanting your missionary effort to be a success, then perhaps, you would choose Jonah. Very few mission efforts have seen the wonderful results that his saw. The entire city of Nineveh, the whole lot of them, from king to the poorest slave—all of them repented of their sin believing the Word of God.

I should be as fortunate as Jonah. When I ask our members to repent of their sin and believe the Word of God, often I'm ignored. At times the members become angry at me. Sometimes they leave the church and go elsewhere. How can I get better results? Our Synod's president wants me to do what "growing" churches are doing—stop using the hymnal; tone down on the doctrine; cut down on creeds and confessions; accept the fact that this is not our grandfather's church anymore, and get with the times.

But the story of Jonah teaches us something completely different from that. One of the greatest cities in the world, and one of the most heathen cities in the world turned to God in one day, not because Jonah got with the times; not because he toned down his message; it wasn't because Jonah had a winsome personality—he didn't even care about the people.

The people turned to God for one reason—Jonah told the people exactly what God said, and through that message God turned their unbelieving hearts away from their sin to Him.

Would we say that Jonah was instrumental in turning Nineveh to God? Well, as prophets go, Jonah was not among the top ten—but his results were. If our Synod wants numerical growth so badly perhaps we should start calling pastors who are a reflection of Jonah—who are not dedicated, and have no love for their people. This may sound like sarcasm, but there is much truth in this.

For all his faults, Jonah did one thing right...just one, but that was enough to bring the entire city to its knees. He preached exactly what God told him to preach, and because he did God worked through his message.

Our churches are so concerned with their pastor's personality profiles; with enacting this program and that drive; they're studying every little detail about how to gain numbers, when they should really focus on the one most important thing—insisting that God's called servants preach and teach the pure Word of God—not necessarily what people want to hear, but what God wants us to hear.

God works growth through His Word, period. He can work through the best and the worst pastor, in the friendliest and in the coldest congregation as long as His pure Word is taught

and proclaimed. Does the pastor have to care about the people? It would be nice if he did, but as the story of Jonah teaches us, that is not going to help or prevent God from working through His Word.

You may have seen the bumper sticker that reads, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” As foolish as that is, congregations sometimes employ a similar motto, “The congregation with the most programs and activities grows.” But even Satan can cause churches to grow, as we see with the tremendous growth of the Mormons. But the growth, both inward and outward, that is truly of God only comes when the pure Word of Christ, the Gospel, is proclaimed. Growth is not our business. It’s God’s. And as our Lutheran Confessions clearly teach, “God works faith, when and where He pleases in those who hear His Word of Gospel.”

We’re so focused here on everything but the Gospel. We think we already know it well enough. We focus on getting work done and getting people to give and to serve. But the Gospel is not just something you know, it’s something you receive. It’s the Bread of Life, the Food of Salvation. And you don’t “know” food—you eat it, you receive it...over and over again your entire life.

Jonah knew that in preaching God’s Word to the people of Nineveh, God could work upon their hearts just as easily as He could work upon their stomachs through the giving of a slice of bread. Jonah trusted God’s Word—which is why he did not want to preach to them. He did not want God to lead them to repentance.

The pastor who trusts the Word of God will focus his ministry on the pure and faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of Christ. He will proclaim the Gospel in every situation. But the pastor who does not trust God’s Word will focus his ministry on everything but the Gospel—his popularity with the members...and therefore he will be careful to offend no one; the number of people in the pews on Sunday mornings; the amount of money in the offering plates; the number of people serving on boards and committees. But those things will take care of themselves as long as the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ is clearly central in the life of the congregation.

Jonah teaches us that more important than whether a pastor loves his people, is the fact that God loves them. Jonah ran away from God’s order to go to Nineveh the first time not because he was afraid of those heathen people—he knew what God was like and how He worked. God loved to show compassion. If Jonah preached God’s Word to the people of Nineveh, God would show mercy to them. He would work through His Word to change their hearts, and God would forgive them, and not destroy their city. And that’s exactly what happened.

Friend, that is still how God is today, for He changes not. God’s greatest pleasure is showing compassion. There is nothing He loves more than forgiving wicked sinners like you and me. You may be the town gossip. You may be one who views child pornography. You may hate your family. You may be as wicked as the wickedest person in Nineveh. You know what? God put Jonah in the pulpit today to give you His Word of grace and mercy. Whether you know the Gospel or not, God has brought you here to receive it. He has forgiven your sins. You will not perish, but you will live. Jesus Christ died for you. As Jonah was in the belly of the fish, so Christ was in the belly of the earth for three days,

so that He may enter your belly with the bread and wine of the Sacrament and give you the risen life—a life that is eternal; a life that cannot be taken from you; a life that is lived in His grace and mercy; a life where God turns you away from your sin to live for Him alone.

Can God do for you what He did for the people of Nineveh? He already did. The destruction you deserve will not come to you. He “destroyed” His Son in your place. Jesus was torn apart by the wrath of God on account of your wickedness. And God raised Him to life that you may have life in Him.

I’ll admit to you that at times I feel just like Jonah. I see how you ignore the Word of God and despise preaching and the Sacraments, and I don’t think you deserve to be shown mercy. Because of the wicked way you live, I’d rather flee in the other direction than preach to you. But you know, this Jonah doesn’t deserve mercy either. Whatever is true of you is also true of me. And despite your failings, and despite my failings, we have one other thing in common—we have a compassionate God. His way is to give mercy, not punishment; life, not death. Friend, He forgives you...and that is the honest truth. And that is exactly what He commands me to tell you.

Will I see growth take place here at Christ Lutheran? I don’t know. That’s up to God. But I do know this—one thing you will always see and hear is Jonah in the pulpit telling you exactly what God wants you to hear—His message of compassion...compassion for you in Jesus Christ. Amen.