

“Not Just a Fish Story” Jonah (selected verses); Acts 1:8 1/13/19

Our Christmas Mission Fair raised over \$13,000 for missions. The money was split between helping people in our area and other people around the world. Some may ask: “Why are we giving money to help people in faraway countries when there is so much need here in our own country, even right here in Adams County? Doesn’t charity begin at home?” That’s a good question, and I’m sure there are a number of folks who wonder about the same thing. I’m going to try to answer it this morning. As always, we Christians turn first to the Bible to find answers to our questions about how we should live. And this time we turn to an unlikely place in the Bible, the story of Jonah!

Listen as I read the first few verses of the story. *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3)*

About 750 years before the coming of Christ, Jonah was given a pretty straightforward command by God. “Go to Nineveh and speak my words against its sin.” Jonah didn’t argue with God, but rather than

heading east toward Nineveh (located in present-day Iraq, near Mosul), Jonah boarded a ship heading due west to Tarshish, about as far from Nineveh as he could go!

What was that about? We won't get the final answer to that question until the end of the story, but some background information may help. Jonah was an Israelite, part of God's chosen people. But Nineveh was the center of power for the rising Assyrian empire, a ruthless empire that gobbled up surrounding nations much like the Borg on Star Trek Next Generation. No one could stop them. Another Old Testament prophet, Nahum, described Nineveh like this, "*Ah! City of bloodshed, utterly deceitful, full of booty- no end to the plunder! The crack of whip and rumble of wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot! Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end- they stumble over the bodies!*" (Nahum 3:1-3)

We shouldn't be surprised that Jonah would want nothing to do with a city like Nineveh, a place that represented a direct threat to his own nation and people. So he headed as far away as he could. You know what happened next. God caused a great storm to come up, and the boat in which Jonah was traveling was in grave peril. The pagan sailors threw cargo overboard and tried to find out who had caused the gods to turn against them. Jonah 'fessed up that it was him, and that his God had

caused the storm because he was angry at Jonah's disobedience. At his urging they threw him overboard. Jonah was apparently ready to die rather than go to Nineveh! But then the sea calmed, the boat was saved, and God provided a great fish to save Jonah from drowning. Inside the fish, Jonah had a change of heart, and the indigestible prophet was deposited on dry land. Here's what happened next.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ²"Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." ³So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:1-4)

God gives Jonah a second chance. God is like that. He often gives us second and third and fourth chances to do the right thing! God doesn't condemn Jonah or berate him for his unfaithfulness. He just gives him another chance to do the right thing and go to Nineveh. This time Jonah obeys and goes and gives the Ninevites God's message, a warning about coming judgment. And then a funny thing happens.

⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. ¹⁰When God saw 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.

(Jonah 3:5,10)

Well, that was unexpected! Clearly God was at work in a powerful way through Jonah's reluctant preaching. The entire city, great and small, repented of their sins, throwing themselves on God's mercy. And God, who is merciful, heard their prayers and relented from the judgment he had intended to come. This is the point at which we would normally expect a good ending statement like, "And they all lived happily ever after!" But, as usual, the Bible is much more real-life than that! Let's continue the story.

But this was very displeasing to Jonah, and he became angry. ²He prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That 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. ³And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴And the LORD said, "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:1-4)

Jonah was not at all pleased by the outcome! The problem with being part of God's chosen people is that you can begin to think you're chosen by God because of how special and good you are, rather than rejoicing in the sheer grace of God! Jonah and many in Israel had begun to mix up believing they were God's chosen people, with thinking they were

the only people God cared about- that other people, like those awful Assyrians in Nineveh, don't deserve God's mercy like we do! But God doesn't buy Jonah's "Israel First" thinking.

After Jonah sits down to sulk in the hot sun, God causes a bush to grow up that shades him. Then God causes a worm to attack the bush and kill it, leaving Jonah also wilting under the harsh Middle-eastern sun again. Jonah decides that this is another good reason that he just can't go on living. Here's God's response,

⁹But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" And he said, "Yes, angry enough to die." ¹⁰Then the LORD said, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.¹¹ And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:9-11)

And that's how the book of Jonah ends! You gotta love the inclusion of the animals! But God makes it abundantly clear to Jonah that he cares not just about Israel, but about all people, even people in the evil Assyrian empire! People God describes as lost, not knowing their right hand from their left.

All of this helps to answer our original question, “Why are we giving money to help people in other, faraway countries when there is so much need here in our own country, even right here in Adams County?” The answer that Jonah’s story gives is simple; God loves people everywhere! We also hear the same thing in that famous verse, John 3:16- “For God so loved... the world...” God loves everyone, not just our own special nation. And we hear it in Jesus’ great commission to his disciples, *⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8)

Those first disciples were to start in Jerusalem, their hometown, spread out to nearby Judea and Samaria, and then go to the whole ancient world- because God cares about people everywhere. And that’s what Christian missions has always looked like, and that’s how it looks here at GPC. We are actively engaged in mission here in Adams County. We give both financial and people support to groups like the Gettysburg CARES homeless shelter. In fact, our building will be the host for CARES for two weeks in early Feb. We are involved with Ruth’s Harvest, which provides food for needy school kids, the Soup Kitchen, Mission of Mercy (which provides free medical and dental care), Survivors (providing shelter and support for abused women), Habitat for Humanity, the Fruitbelt

Farmworkers Ministry and several others. Lou and I help people off the street with vouchers for food, gasoline, and shelter. We also assist people with rent or electric bills. Three of our mission trips are within the US- South Carolina, Appalachia, and South Dakota.

But we also support missions and missionaries internationally, often in places of great poverty, or where a witness about the free grace of God through Jesus Christ is limited. Places like Mexico, Honduras, Haiti, Thailand, Japan, and Kenya. The book of Jonah reminds us that God cares about the people in those places just as much as he cares about the people here! And God wants to use us to reach out to people near and far. That's always been the call of Christian missions.

You can get involved by generously giving to the work of GPC and volunteering in any local ministry. You can learn about and go on one of our mission trips, or support them financially and with your prayers. Pick up one of our mission opportunity brochures this morning. You can pray for our missionaries, learn about their countries and the challenges they face, and correspond with them via email. They love that! Or, perhaps God is calling you to go somewhere else and serve God there in mission, perhaps even in retirement! There are lots of opportunities. God is calling us to get involved in showing love for the people he loves. What will you do?