

11/06/2016 - Communion Sunday

“Throwing Shade: The Inevitableness of God’s Mercy” -- Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: *Jonah 1, 3 (4)*

God’s call to Jonah to preach repentance to the Ninevites needs to be put into an historical perspective. God didn’t just ask Jonah to go to some town somewhere; God has asked Jonah to go right into the capital city of the Assyrian empire. As the story tells us, it is a huge city - it would take 3 days to walk from edge to edge. But moreso, the Assyrian empire is one of the most violent and brutal empires to ever have existed on the face of the earth.

The empire came into its own in about 1350 BC. At the height of the empire it ruled the entire Gulf region, from Iraq to Egypt. Ninevah was the capital city and from there raiding parties and conquering armies were sent throughout the region to exact destruction. Think of the worst torture techniques from the Middle Ages, or even from today. It is likely, and I am not just making things up, those techniques came from the Assyrians. Brutal and bloodthirsty, they were an empire of nightmares.

Jonah was a Jew, and in about 722 BC, after many attacks and failed battles, Assyria finally succeeded in crushing and destroying Jerusalem. And it is into the Assyrian capital that Jonah is being sent. This is why he runs away, as far as he can. And this is why, after Jonah is vomited forth onto the shores of Ninevah by the great fish and his preaching tour of the city is through, we find Jonah on the hill east of the city which God has saved from destruction because they repented of their sin.

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; (4:1,2)

Jonah is horrified that God has saved a city full of bloodthirsty, war-hungry, violence-filled people just because they have repented of their sin before God. They don’t even worship God. Worse, even the animals appear to have repented. And so Jonah is filled with anger and contempt and frustration as he looks out over the city. Jonah builds a little shelter for himself, but the shelter provides no shade in the bright desert sun. So God sends a castor bean plant to give Jonah some shade.

The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush. (4:5-6)

From here, in the shade of God’s little plant, Jonah “throws shade” on the Ninevites. Are you familiar with the phrase “throwing shade”? Really, at its best, “throwing shade” is the art of the insult. The phrase has sort of mainstreamed now on the internet, but it has been in the

culture since the 1980s. And really, even if you don't know the phrase "throwing shade", you know what it is. It is an ancient artform.

For instance, back in the late 1700s a very smart political radical named John Wilkes had a brief conversation with the Earl of Sandwich. The Earl said to John, "*You, Mr. Wilkes, will die of either the pox or on the gallows.*" To which Mr. Wilkes responded, "*That depends, my lord, on whether I embrace your mistress or your principles.*"

Or how about this exchange between Lady Astor and Winston Churchill. At a high society supper, Lady Astor said to Churchill, in the heat of an argument, "*Winston, if you were my husband, I would poison your coffee.*" Churchill, always good with a witty comeback, said, "*Madam, if I were your husband, I would drink it.*"

The mastery of insult is a worthy pastime and it is really what "throwing shade" is all about - the artistry of word and insult and humor to cut to the core. Like James Reston's analysis of Richard Nixon: *He inherited some good instincts from his Quaker forebears, but by diligent hard work, he overcame them.*

Sometimes the insult is against an entire group of people, like this one from Marilyn Monroe: "*Women who seek to be equal to men lack ambition.*" Short, and once you think about it, the deeper it goes.

But the art of the insult carries with it a dark side, a harsh whip that hurts the person throwing the shade as much as the one receiving the shade. Proverbs 18:3 says, *When wickedness comes, contempt comes also.* When we speak of Jonah in particular, and "throwing shade" in general, often underneath that attitude is **contempt** - contempt for others, contempt for a group of people, contempt for God.

And so while the sun rises on the hill outside Ninevah,

God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered. ⁸When the sun rose, God prepared a sultry east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint and asked that he might die. He said, 'It is better for me to die than to live.' (4:7-8)

It turns out that the little plant the Lord provided for the Prophet Jonah was in fact an object lesson for Jonah. In the same way, the worm consumes the plant God provided, the shade God provided for Jonah while Jonah 'throws shade' on the Ninevites, so also contempt and insult consumes our humanity, consumes our ability to love one another and love God. Remember, there is in Jonah's world no group more worthy of contempt than the Ninevites. The Assyrians are a culture of contempt, a culture of hate and destruction, and so Jonah also throws contempt and hate upon them from the hillside.

The Assyrians are doing what they know, as part of an 800 year old empire. But Jonah, who is called by God to bring a message of repentance to Ninevah, wants God to destroy them, to level the city in the same way the Assyrians leveled Jerusalem. Jonah does not want them to repent, and by not repenting, the Assyrians would never have the experience of God's lovingkindness and presence. This, right here, the desire to refuse another the opportunity to

participate in the love of God, is the essence of contempt, the heart of hatred. And this is the world Jonah looks upon from the hill.

Contempt is what one author calls one of the four horsemen of relationships, the others being Criticism, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling¹. Dr. Gottman says of contempt, “*When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean – treating others with disrespect, mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, mimicking, and/or body language such as eye-rolling. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner – which come to a head in the perpetrator attacking the accused from a position of relative superiority. Contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce according to Dr. Gottman’s work. It must be eliminated!*”

When Jonah first arrived at the hill over the city, he says to God,

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.’

The words Jonah says here are best read outloud with a sneering, critical, hate-filled voice. Jonah cannot abide by the inevitable, unrelenting mercy and love of God for all. The contempt Jonah feels for the Ninevites is the wrath he wishes on those he hates. This is what contempt does - like the worm that eats the plant, contempt consumes our hope for repentance, love, and mercy. Jonah cannot

recognize his kinship, his common humanity with these "foreigners" - this vision of the universal love of God brooding over the wayward race of humankind, seeking to bind up its wounds and its divisions, this dawning dream of human brotherhood comprising all races and peoples, set on the only indestructible base, the love of universal fatherhood of God in whom all people live, and move, and have their being.²

Paul writes a wonderful question to the Romans in his letter:

Why do you pass judgement on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God. (Romans 14:10)

The story of Jonah tells us why we do this - because we hold others in contempt, because we do not believe them to be deserving of the forgiveness of God. Repentance in the story of Jonah is not really for the Ninevites, but for Jonah. He is the one in need of God’s love and mercy, just as we are.

¹ <https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/> (accessed 10/31/16)

² From The Interpreter’s Bible, commentary on Jonah, page 892.

Do you remember the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Gospel of Luke? The Pharisee comes into the sanctuary of the Temple to pray and there beside him is a lowly tax collector. The Pharisee throws a crude kind of shade upon the poor man, saying, ““God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.” And what does the tax collector pray?

¹³But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’ (Luke 18:9-14)

Repentance, the seeking after God’s mercy and forgiveness, is the antidote to contempt. This is the essence of the Jesus Prayer, which is very simple:

O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Let’s say it together:

O Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Psalm 123 says it this way:

*Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.*

I don’t know about you, but I have had more than enough of contempt myself. Let us repent of our contempt because that is where humanity and love begin. In our repentance God’s mercy can find a way in. If we stay rooted in our inhumanity and our contempt, God has no way in.

Back on the hill with Jonah, after the lesson of the shading plant, God asks 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 labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night.

Jonah’s concerns are misguided, misapplied and mistaken. Even a prophet of God, while fulfilling the needs of God, can still not be aligned with the will of God. For the Ninevites, God’s love and forgiveness were finally inevitable, unrelenting, like a wave of care over the entire city. But for Jonah, well, what of Jonah?

At least we know, that even in our contempt and hate, God will sit with us. God will try to teach us about repentance and forgiveness. God will speak to us, and at the very least, Jonah is still speaking to and with God. Even an argument with God is still a relationship with God.

How will we let God's love and mercy into our lives?

As we vote on Tuesday, as we chew our nails and worry about the coming apocalypse of democracy, at least according to the news, regardless of your position, think about those who do not support whom you support, think about those who do not think like you do, and think about contempt. Will you throw shade? Or will you accept the shade of God's love and peace and hope? Like the worm, contempt consumes and destroys our relationships with other people, with groups of people, with even God.

Remember Jonah on the hill. Remember God's call to repentance. And remember the inevitable wave of God's mercy and love for all people.

Then the Lord said, 'You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?' (4:10-11)

Even the animals, Jonah. Even the animals repented and received God's love and mercy. You, Jonah, are even more loved than the animals. The whole world is the concern of God, even those who are not like you. And also many animals.

Amen.