

## CAN PEOPLE CHANGE?

Maybe you were under the impression that, if somebody in the Bible is called to be a prophet, a spokesperson for God, that person is always thrilled to be called and eager to be used by God for God's purposes. If you were under that impression, I would call your attention to Jonah, who was without a doubt God's most reluctant prophet.

Reading the book of Jonah and doing some reflecting on it, I had a sudden epiphany about my profession of ordained ministry. You see, as a preacher and modern day prophet, I used to think the worst thing that could happen to me was to be ignored. You know what I'm saying, right? I'm up here in the pulpit, giving my sermon, and at some point as I'm speaking I look out and see a congregation of blank faces, drooping heads and closed eyes. Hello? Anybody home?

Having preached the gospel for thirty years now, I know a little something about what it's like to not be heard, to have people doze through my sermons, miss the point, hear it all wrong, ignore my message, or reject my words. And I'll be honest, that can be a struggle for me. But when I think about it, there's something that can be much more difficult for me to cope with; and that's to be heard; to have people to actually listen to what I say and take it seriously. You see, even though I work hard on my sermons, striving to discern a word from the Lord and doing everything I can to get you to listen to me and understand what I'm saying, it's kind of scary when you do hear what I preach.

I once preached a sermon—I don't even remember what it was about, now—and a woman came up to me after the service and thanked me profusely for my message. She said that she had been wrestling with some tough issues at work, and now, because of my wonderful sermon, she was going to leave her job.

I almost went into cardiac arrest! I mean, what if she had interpreted it wrong? Or what if I wasn't clear enough in getting my message across, or she misunderstood what I said. I didn't want to be responsible for this person leaving her job and regretting it in the future. In my mind I imagined this woman bolting into my office one day down the road, or tracking me down years later, and telling me what an idiot I was—that she had trusted what I said

in the pulpit and made a decision based on it, and it was the biggest mistake of her entire life! Do you understand what I mean when I say that, for a minister or prophet, one thing that can be even worse than people not hearing a sermon is when they actually do hear it?

This morning the entire book of Jonah was read to us. It's a very short book but it's very powerful. Jonah, as I mentioned a little while ago, was God's most reluctant prophet. He absolutely did not want to do what God told him to do, and did not want to say to the Ninevites what God wanted him to say. Because the Ninevites might actually hear it. So Jonah just refused to do it. He ran away and jumped on a boat to get as far away from God as he possibly could. And we all know how that worked out for him. I mean, what could possibly go wrong, trying to run away from the Lord?

Absolutely nothing, except for finding himself on a storm-tossed ship that was about to sink, and being swallowed whole by a humungous fish. I thought it would be interesting to retell the story of Jonah in modern terms, as though it happened today. What might that story sound like?

A Congregational pastor, living in Scarborough, Maine, was told by God to go to North Korea and preach to the people there. At first he refused—and with very good reason, he thought, because North Korea was a brutal and oppressive nation run by a mentally deranged dictator who constantly threatened the United States with nuclear annihilation. So why should he, a respectable minister of God, have to go to a horrible place like that, to preach among people like them?

But the Lord persisted in hounding the poor pastor, and didn't give him a moment's peace. At one point God locked the pastor up in the steeple of the church—a very dark and dreary place—for three days, until he finally and reluctantly gave in. "Okay, God, you win," the preacher said. "I'll go to North Korea and preach to the people there if it will make you happy. But in my humble opinion, the whole thing is just a big waste of time."

After God released him from the steeple, the minister hopped on a plane and flew to Pyongyang, North Korea. The pastor preached a short sermon with a bad attitude. "You and your murderous "Great Leader," Kim Jong Un, are all going to hell unless you repent of your sins. God told me to tell you so. Good night and good luck." Then he gave the benediction and immediately made a beeline for the door so he could get to the airport and head back home. But, much to the minister's shock and consternation, he couldn't get out of the auditorium. All these people—poor, bedraggled citizens and military leaders

and even Kim Jong Un himself—rushed up with tears in their eyes, crowded around him. They told him they were truly going to change their ways and wanted to give their lives over to Jesus. Then they all demanded to be baptized.

God was overjoyed with the response! But the preacher wasn't happy about it. His mind had already made up as to the kind of horrible, inhuman people the North Koreans were, and their genuine change of heart and sudden religious transformation had shattered that perception. The minister sulked and fumed on the plane during the entire flight. He prayed to God, saying, "You see, Lord? That's why I didn't want to go to North Korea. I know you're a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and you would end up forgiving those evil North Koreans if you had a chance to do so. I'm so humiliated and dismayed. Why did you do this to me?"

A smiling stewardess came by his seat and offered him a package of peanuts. He was hungry so he took it gratefully, even if there were only six peanuts in the bag. The minister was just about to open the package when the stewardess returned. "I'm sorry, sir," she said, "but I just realized you bought an economy ticket and you're not supposed to get any peanuts." And she snatched the bag away from him.

"Thanks a lot, Lord," the minister said. "What else do you have in mind to bother me? Why don't you just crash this plane and kill me right now, to put me out of my misery. But save the other passengers onboard, of course."

And God said to the minister, "Are you angry about a little bag of peanuts? Even angry enough to die? You're concerned about those peanuts, which you didn't produce and were given to you and taken away from you in the blink of an eye. So shouldn't I be concerned about North Korea, in which there are millions of people who haven't heard the Good News yet, as well as many animals?"

In the story of Jonah, and in my little modernized parable based on it, one of the central themes is that God believes people's hearts can change; and because God believes people's hearts can change, God is willing to be merciful, generous and gracious while patiently waiting for that change of heart to occur.

Sometimes change is very hard to accept, whether it happens to us or to other people or to the world around us. Many of us say we want to change and want things in life to change, especially if it's change for the better. People claim, for instance, that they want the power of God to make all things new, including them. But do they really believe that? I mean, let's face it: change—I'm talking about genuine, heart-felt change—can be terrifying.

Even though we frequently complain about the present state of affairs

and condition of the world, there's also something comforting about the status quo. We know our enemies and friends, and everybody has their place, good or bad. Everything in our little, predictable world fits like a glove. And we can get so comfortable with the way things are that our attitudes and opinions can harden our hearts and minds like concrete and remain that way for the rest of our lives.

A man who was a counselor for many years once said, "The one thing I have learned from my many years of counseling people with problems is that human beings almost never, ever change. Even when it would do them a world of good and make their lives much better, it's very rare for a person to genuinely change."

What happened in the book of Jonah flies in the face of that statement. Because at the end of the story, the wicked Ninevites, who were the Evil Empire par excellence back in Jonah's day, turned back to God and lived a good and righteous life. So, by inference, the North Koreans can potentially repent. And so can the Muslim terrorists of ISIS; and undocumented immigrants; and white supremacists; and the Russians and the Chinese; that driver who cut you off on the Interstate; and yes, even that family member or friend who badly hurt or wronged you.

And the miracle of it is, this repentance can happen despite the reluctance of the messenger to proclaim God's message of the need to change. Because you see, with God all things are possible, including the transformation of human hearts from wickedness to holiness.

That's part of what faith is, my friends. Faith is, at least in part, the belief that God's presence and power can transform our hearts, and the hearts of others who we think are seemingly beyond redemption. And isn't that what salvation is all about? Isn't that what Jesus was constantly preaching and teaching and reminding the Scribes and Pharisees of? That even people who are considered to be hopeless sinners can and do change and be saved by the power and grace of God?

The scary part, of course, is that we don't know what this change will entail, what it will demand, and where it might lead. Which is why people often decide that they're quite comfortable with the way things are now, thank you very much. It's even possible to so strongly want to resist and reject the change the Lord has in mind for us or for someone else, that we get angry at God for even suggesting it.

I'm sure there are areas in all our lives where we have come to an ultimate, final, fixed-in-cement conclusion. There are people we have given up on, closed the door on or turned away from because we've lost faith that they

can change or will ever change.

Well, the message in the book of Jonah, for those who don't believe people can change, who are convinced God will never get through to some people's hearts and transform them for the better, who have doubts that God can work a new thing among us and make repentance possible, is that we could be in for a big surprise. Just like Jonah.

A well-known—well at least well known to most seminary students and professors--German pastor and theologian named Helmut Thielicke, liked to show visitors to his office an old photograph which he always kept near his desk. It was a snapshot of a nativity pageant. This picture was of a group of grizzled looking men wearing white robes and holding candles in their rough hands. Another group of men were kneeling before them, acting terrified. The photo depicted a host of angels, speaking to some fearful shepherds about the birth of the Savior. People would often ask Thielicke why this rather odd photograph was in his study.

The theologian explained that it was taken in prison. The men in the scene were all convicts, hardened criminals, some of them murderers, whose lives had been transformed by Christ. These once very bad people, thugs and killers and thieves, were dressed like angels. And their outer costumes reflected their repentant hearts that had been cleansed by God's divine grace. For Helmut Thielicke, the photo was a beautiful parable and a powerful reminder to him of the power of God to transform human hearts and redeem human lives.

You probably noticed that my sermon title this morning is, "Can People Change?" I left it an unanswered question. The jury is still out on it. Now I will hold up a question for all of us to think about. And that is, do you believe human beings can change for the better? Even the very bad ones? The people we think are seemingly beyond redemption?

Is it too hard to believe that, with the help and power of God, people can change? That hardened hearts can be softened? Sinners can repent? And God can and does forgive, redeem and save even the worst human beings?

Why would we doubt that? After all, it's the very heart of our faith. It's the Good News that, deep down, we yearn to hear; and it's also the Good News we're called to share with the world, including present day Ninevites. So thanks be to God, my friends, who has such great compassion and mercy that God took pity on the wicked city of Nineveh and was pleased when they had a change of heart. Because that means God will also have great compassion and mercy on us and be pleased when our hearts change. Amen.