

Pentecost 14
Dealing with People We Don't Like
Reformation, Media
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(ask kids – can you think of someone you don't like? -- adults?)

Will Rogers once said, "I haven't met a person I didn't like." I think he was probably in the minority.

Most of us, at some time or another have had people we don't like. It can be an individual who has hurt us or with whom we have had some conflict, or it could be a whole group of people. For Jonah, it was the Ninevites.

You know the story – Jonah was told to go to Ninevah and let the people know that unless they changed their ways, they would come under God's judgment. Jonah wanted them to receive the full wrath of God and tried to avoid his assignment by running away – that's when a great storm threatened the ship he was on, and sailors threw him overboard – and the whale swallowed Jonah and spat him up on the shores of Ninevah. So he preached as poorly as he could, hoping the Ninevites would disregard what he said.

Jonah did not like the Ninevites.

Why is it that we don't like some people? In this case, the Ninevites were enemies of Israel- they had fought against each other. When someone in your group designates people of another group as enemies, you begin to "not like" them. And all the people in that group are clumped together, stereotypes are created that demean the "enemy" and influence our attitudes. In WWII for example the propaganda films and war posters depicted Germans as bloodthirsty and the Japanese as fanatical. They were Ninevites!

It had an impact on how Americans treated those of German or Japanese descent.

For all I know Jonah might have thought the Ninevites were an inferior people – lazy and not very smart., and besides, they had funny accents and most of them didn't even know Hebrew – so Jonah couldn't understand them. When you think about it, a lot of our attitudes about other people come from things we

have heard about them, or things we have been taught about them. Cultural and societal prejudices definitely influence our attitudes and our behaviors about other people. The fact that it is a Jonah-like response is proof that similar methods have been used for centuries and in every country around the world. In our own country, we can see it in the old “Step ‘n Fetch it” movies and Aunt Jemima stereotypes used to portray African Americans for over 200 years – images and teachings so ingrained in our culture that they continue to influence our attitudes and behaviors today. They are treated like Ninevites!

What is it in our hearts and minds that creates barriers because accents are hard to understand; or customs are different; why do we label people with such broad strokes and buy in to the cultural and societal prejudices that stereotype and demean individuals because of a country of origin or the color of their skin or, dare I say it, sexual orientation . Jonah has plenty of us who face the same dilemma he faced. Ninevites exist all over the world – only the name changes – the attitudes remain the same. How do you deal with people you don’t like?

One way is the Jonah response – it’s probably the way most of us deal with this issue. Jonah basically did not change his attitude. He wanted God to punish the Ninevites, but when the Ninevites sincerely repented, God forgave them – which upset Jonah as our lesson this morning indicates. (Jonah 3:10-4:11) And even when God tries to show Jonah how childish his response is, it doesn’t change his attitude – he pouts until the end. He can’t understand that God loves all people. God does not always like some of the things people do – even some of the things we do – but God loves all people and wants to make them better people.

But there is another way. It is the surprise that Jesus describes in the parable of the Good Samaritan – an oxymoron if ever there was one in Israel. A Good Samaritan? -- It’s like the old

phrase some of you might remember from the Cold War era --- The only Good Communist is a _____ (dead) communist. Samaritans were despised as much or more than Ninevites. They were the niggers of the day – yes, that offensive term would have been the kind of epithet used for them.

And so when a man was beaten, you would have expected it to be by Samaritans, but no, it was other Israelites, local robbers who beat him and robbed him. And when someone as prominent as a priest or a Levite came along, and saw a fellow Israelite hurt, you would have thought they would pause and help – but they didn't. So when an Ugly Samaritan stopped and helped and provided such gracious care, you can imagine how shocked Jesus' hearers would be. Jesus wanted them to rethink their attitudes – to re-consider their prejudice – to change their opinion of Samaritans, just like God tried to help Jonah see the Ninevites as real people.

Getting to know someone as a person, going beyond the labels that your group has placed on someone who is being bullied, looking past the stereo-types and brain-washing of a government or newspapers or movies that effect our attitudes about people of other nationalities or creeds; even thinking about your own personal experiences and the tendency to use one incident to condemn a whole class or a whole race of people is a way to resist the Jonah response and move toward the Jesus response.

In the great biographical movie *Gandhi*, there is a powerful scene where a villager comes to the Mahatma:

Nahari: I'm going to Hell! I killed a child! I smashed his head against a wall.

Gandhi: Why?

Nahari: Because they killed my son! The Muslims killed my son!

[*indicates boy's height*]

Gandhi: I know a way out of Hell. Find a child, a child whose mother and father have been killed

and raise him as your own.

[indicates same height]

Gandhi: Only be sure that he is a Muslim and that you raise him as (a Muslim) one.

Sometimes, only as you get to know other people as individuals, only as you are able to walk for a while in their shoes, can you fully appreciate who they are and what they are like. Just as this Hindu man had lost a son because of the hatred of Muslims, so he had to realize that Muslims had lost children because of the hatred of Hindu's.

Jesus wants us to learn how to be neighbors to others, and to discover the neighborly attitudes we see in those who are different. The entire parable is about how to fulfill the commandments – to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. But we quickly discover that it is not easy, especially with people we don't like.

My wife Linda told me a story about her mother – who had a particular individual that she did not like – really could not stand. Finally, as a devout Catholic, she went to her priest and confessed her inability to like the individual. The priest said to her “you have to forgive him.” And she said, “I can't.” Then, he said, “you have to pray for him – and pray for yourself.” Pray for the other – and pray for yourself, because carrying around anger or hatred is a burden for us to carry – pray for the other person – in prayer we hope that each person, the other and ourselves can discover the person underneath the anger and pain that God knows and loves.

Amen.