

Willow Glen UMC August 26, 2012 Jonah 4

My daughter Kristen is now at Willow Glen Middle School. When we arrived last year, the 6th grade was full and she got bumped to John Muir. Despite the bomb threat at the high school last Friday, her mother is very glad to have her back at our neighborhood school.

One thing I found out about Willow Glen Middle is that it used to be called Edwin Markham Junior High School. Now Edwin Markham was a west coast poet. Few people know much about his poems anymore, but many of you have heard this one:

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

I love that poem. It reminds me of the words of Abraham Lincoln who once said, "The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend." So it's fitting that Edwin Markham would

be the one to read a poem at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922.

What Lincoln and Markham had and we need is the social imagination to think that we can make an enemy a friend. And it takes a theological imagination to believe that the God who loves you loves them, too. Poor old Jonah didn't have much imagination of either kind. Or if he did, he chose not to use it.

We've come to the end of the Jonah story in Chapter 4. In Chapter 3, Jonah went reluctantly to Nineveh to preach against that enemy city. When he did, the king and the people immediately declared a fast, put on sackcloth and repented of their wickedness. So God forgave their sin and did not destroy the city.

We talked last week about Jonah's great success as a preacher. But at the same time, he was a colossal failure as a prophet. After all, he had told the people: "Forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown." But forty days came and went

and God didn't do what Jonah said God was going to do. So Jonah was angry. Jonah was humiliated. Jonah went out into the desert, because God had made a fool out of him with all that divine forgiveness. It was all God's fault. That's why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh in the first place. That's why he took off for Tarshish. Because he knew God would turn out to be a nice guy. Jonah knew God would change her mind. And now Jonah wanted to die.

What happened was not at all what was supposed to happen. Jonah brought the message of God to the people of Nineveh. But it was the people of Nineveh that taught him about the mercy of God. Here's the prophet who is supposed to know all and see all and has to learn about God's love from those who don't know their right hand from their left. I've got news for you, Jonah: God's love is even bigger than you fear it is.

What a sorry excuse for a prophet. What a strange story to include in the Bible. Makes you wonder, why does the Bible tell this story? And who needs to hear it?

First of all, the Book of Jonah is a rather late writing in the Hebrew Bible. It took form in a time after the exile in Babylonia, when the Jews became more scattered around the eastern Mediterranean, so they needed a much bigger God. Centuries before, they could get along with a simple tribal god, a god confined to the land and people of Canaan. But as they spread out, they needed a God who was no longer tied to a particular piece of property or who only had power over a particular group of people.

If you're only going to have one God and you're going to go out into the wider world, then you're going to need a God who is Lord of all. So the story of Jonah comes at a critical time in the history of Israel when the people begin to understand that their God is not just the God of the Jews but

also the God of the Ninevites in Assyria, and by extension, the God of all peoples and nations. But there's a catch: if God is really the God of everyone, then God can show mercy to anyone. Like it or lump it.

The Golden Age of Israel had passed. The circumstances on the ground had changed. The people of the promise needed a bigger God. And so do we. I was reading in the newspaper this week about the mosque that is planned for the tiny town of San Martin. And I was dismayed to read about the opposition that has aligned against it. One woman wrote in the *Morgan Hill Times* that she is "just suspicious that they're sneaking in to contaminate our country." [*Mercury News*, Aug. 21, A4] Whoa. That's not the country I love and live in. She must be talking about some other country.

I'm sorry that my husband isn't here today. He's in Eugene, Oregon, at the wedding of the son of some old friends. If he were here, he could tell us about how he has tried all of

his life to believe in a big enough God. It started when he converted from his parents' nominal Judaism to Christianity at the age of 18. He was first a Congregationalist, then an Episcopalian and finally a Roman Catholic. Along the way, he worked as a linguist for a Native American tribe and learned about their religious practices. He also dabbled in Buddhism. He married a Methodist minister. He came full circle when he got his PhD in Jewish Studies. But even then his God was not quite big enough.

That must be why he is now working for a very progressive and charismatic Muslim woman, Maha Genadi, who runs an educational nonprofit called Islamic Networks Group. ING sends trained speakers to schools, churches, civic groups, hospitals, and government agencies to teach people about Islam (and other world religions). Last year, Maha was invited to Washington, D.C., to break the Ramadan fast at the White House. At dinner, she sat next to President Obama.

This Ramadan, Hank and I were invited to break the Ramadan fast with Maha and the staff and supporters of ING. So, a few weeks ago, we gathered in the community room of her Santana Row apartment building. When the sun went down, they passed out a fig and a bottle of water. Then there were prayers. Afterwards, a woman gave a talk about the spiritual benefits of fasting. And I thought, "I could hear the very same talk at a church or a synagogue." Sneaking in to contaminate our country? Really?

Some folks, like Jonah, have a failure of imagination. They can't imagine that God could be big enough to love Muslims, too. And this is where I thought the sermon would end, with a challenge to embrace all the sons and daughters of Abraham. Apparently, God had other plans. I got an email Thursday night that challenged me to stretch my theological imagination even farther.

The email I received came from a church member whose

sister posted some questions on Facebook. I've never met her sister, but I now know that she is a lesbian. This lesbian sister writes a blog, and she's been in the habit of collecting and posting stories about all the hateful and hurtful things Christians have said and done to gays and lesbians. She was, by her own admission, proudly anti-Christian, until recently when she met two Christian women who were neither hateful nor hurtful. She describes them as "stellar people...with a strong and joyous faith in God."

These new friends stirred in her many new questions about God and Christianity. To get some answers, she posted them on Facebook. And her sister forwarded them to me. The first question had to do with how to reconcile homosexuality and Christianity. But it was her second question that really got me. She asked, "If there is a God, does He hate me? This is a serious question, but again, you don't have to answer if you don't want to."

I got the email pretty late. I had plenty of other things to do. Like Jonah, I wanted to go to Tarshish, but God told me to go to Nineveh. So I stayed up to write my response. The next morning, I got an email with a link to her blog.

This is part of what she wrote:

Over the course of the fifteen hours since I wrote that, I have gotten over sixty responses. Sixty! I haven't even finished sorting through them. I'm overwhelmed... The call went out and people responded, forwarding the questions to their preachers and friends and fellow church members or old college buddies...

All of the messages were brimming with love. I mean, **every single one**. All of them. I don't know how else to express this. I have been message bombed by people who have taken time out of their own lives to tell me that they love me and that their God loves me...Without exception, **WITHOUT EXCEPTION**, they were kind, loving, beautiful, and overflowing with that kind of warm and joyous faith that I found in the first two women who even made me start questioning in the first place."

And this is where it gets really interesting. Here is where she puts on the sackcloth of repentance, just like the Ninevites.

She says,

"Well, now I feel like a total ****. And now I have to go back and rethink everything I have thought about God

and his followers. Now I have to stop looking for the evil in Christians, and let myself be open to the good. Now I have to take a good hard look at my own bigotry and my own thoughtlessness and figure out how to move forward from here in a loving and compassionate, and dare I say it, *Christian way*.

Am I a Christian now? No. Do I have a deep and abiding faith in God? Not really. But I have a strong and joyous love for all of the Christians who messaged me last night and this morning. And this is how it starts. *THIS* is where we start building the bridges. Because there are gay Christians out there... and there are straight, but accepting Christians out there. And even more importantly, it seems, at least from what I have seen in the last couple of days, that there is a place in this world for gays and God.

I read this and thought: Wow. When you go to Nineveh, sometimes the Ninevites teach you something about the God you love. And I also thought: Our sister is on a journey, and she isn't alone. In this congregation, we have other sisters and brothers and sons and daughters who are on that journey, too. I pray that they will all find the love they are looking for in Jesus Christ. For some, that may be a very distant day, but this is where it starts, my friends: with our trying to imagine how unimaginably big the love of God is and wrapping our minds

around the unbelievable truth that that love includes many more people than just the Ninevites. Unbelievably, it includes even me.

So, I say to Jonah: like it or lump it, Jonah, because every time someone tries to draw a circle to keep folks out, God will draw the circle even wider to take them in. As the hymn we sing puts it: "Your love, O God, is broad like beach and meadow, wide as the wind, and our eternal home." Let's sing it.