

“The Sabbath Was Made For Us All”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
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*10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*

Jonah 3:10-4:11

Mark 2:23-28

‘... the Lord said [to Jonah]:

“You are concerned about a vine that you did not plant or take care of,  
a vine that grew up in one night and died the next.” Jonah 4:10

Let us pray... O God,

We praise you for the variety and diversity of Creation

and for the “open and affirming” Gospel message you have given us to share  
to get people to care.

Amen

When you think about it, Jonah and the Whale is an odd – though familiar,  
image from the Bible.

It ranks right up there with Noah’s Ark filled with animals that came two by two,  
Moses shattering the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments,  
and David fighting Goliath with a slingshot.

These are recognizable images even to many in our post-literate, post-Christian,  
post-modern culture – and yet a mystery to most people as to  
what they actually represent and why they are even in the Bible.

What is the significance of a person swallowed up by a whale  
and later coughed out onto shore after three days?

When we read the whole story, we find that Jonah was running away from God  
by sailing to the farthest end of civilization –  
which was Spain, at the time.

God wanted him to preach to the people of Nineveh,  
but this was a city of Babylon – enemies of the people of Israel;  
Not wanting to have anything to do with helping Babylonians,  
Jonah ran away.

So, God sent the whale – literally, a ‘big fish’, to capture Jonah and  
bring him back to do what God wanted him to do.

However, it wasn’t just the big fish that God sent to accomplish this.

God first sent or ‘appointed’ the wind to create a terrible storm at sea  
and frighten the crew of the ship into putting Jonah overboard  
for the fish to catch him.

The wind over the water, though, is the first clue to what I believe  
is a broader understanding of what this story is about...

Willard, p.2

When Jonah finally goes to Nineveh and gives them a dire warning from God – they all repent in sackcloth and ashes, from the king on down!  
Jonah is skeptical of this sudden transformation and sits down on a hill outside the city to see if they return to their evil ways...

Meanwhile, it gets hot on that hill,  
so God sends a leafy vine to immediately spring up  
and provide Jonah comfort with its shade.  
But then at night, God sends a worm to attack the plant  
and the next morning, God sends the Sun to finish the job for it to wither away.  
This all serves to put Jonah in considerable discomfort and distress,  
but surprisingly it is because he is grieving over the withered vine!  
The final verse to this story is a question:  
Just as Jonah grew to care about a plant, shouldn't God care  
for a city filled with thousands of people as well as their animals?

Throughout this story, God 'sends' – or 'appoints' something from nature to fulfill a purpose...

The very first example is when the wind is sent to blow across the water like 'the Spirit hovering over the face of the deep' in the beginning of Genesis. God was using all of Creation to get Jonah's attention to create empathy – to get Jonah to care about other living things – like a plant, and even to find compassion for his enemies...

Getting people to care – 'When you know someone, it makes a difference.'  
This is an important concept in the debate about being 'open & affirming' of people 'no matter who they are or where they are' from.  
This theme is woven into the Gospel itself and I believe it is a core concept of Christianity, evident throughout the Church's history – and sometimes in spite of it...

Today's Gospel lesson is the beginning of a set of stories, Mark chapters 2-5 , that describe a day in the life of Jesus – which happens to be a Sabbath day. I have used these narratives for Biblical storytelling, and in preparing the text, I looked up the root word meaning for 'Sabbath' in Hebrew and discovered it means 'hosts' or 'armies' – which could also mean 'multitudes'. In this very first story, Jesus finds himself in conflict with the religious authorities when his disciples break the Sabbath rules:  
They had been plucking grain from a field to eat for their breakfast as they walked to the synagogue at Capernaum.  
The struggle continues at this synagogue when Jesus heals a man with a deformed hand and is met with hard-hearted disapproval.

Willard, p.3

As the day unfolds, Jesus appoints twelve of his followers to be his disciples,  
and when they return to his mother's house,  
they find a crowd gathered outside, waiting for them.

A vicious argument ensues, so that Jesus' mother and siblings rush out  
to restrain him because it sounded like he was enraged.

Jesus was furious with being accused of collusion with the devil  
and he warned his attackers about the unforgivable sin of a hardened heart.

When his family tries, but cannot get through crowd, they anxiously call for him,  
but he calms everybody down and affirms the multitude gathered there,  
that they are his family, too –  
that anybody who loves is part of Jesus' family.

The rest of the afternoon is spent with Jesus telling parables on the beach,  
teaching and entertaining that multitude of people from Capernaum.

The Parable of the Sower specifically addresses the earlier conflicts of the day  
concerning hearts that were hardened, or shallow, or troubled,  
as well as hearts prepared to be open to affirm God's word of love.

At day's end, Jesus and his disciples set off on a sea-journey –  
and like Jonah they are caught in a terrible storm at sea.

Jesus rebukes this wind as if it were an evil spirit and  
calms the sea as he calms his disciples' fears.

They come to land and as they climb out of the boat,  
immediately, a psychotic man runs up to confront them.

With his words, Jesus frees this man from his inward pain,  
symbolized as a herd of 2,000 filthy pigs called 'Legion' –  
a reference to the Roman armies that occupied their land.

When the villagers of that region learn  
that the psychotic man was now sane, they were fearful –  
and Rene Girard says this was because they lost their scapegoat;  
and besides this, they were upset,  
because their pig farming industry was ruined,  
so they ask Jesus to leave their territory.

This man who had been healed from his psychosis, also got his self-respect back;  
So, Jesus left him to bring healing to his own community  
by telling others about what Jesus had done for him –  
and because they knew this man, that would make the difference.

Then, Jesus and his disciples sail back across the Galilee to return to Capernaum,  
and there – ominously, waiting on the beach is a crowd of people,  
including the leader of the Capernaum synagogue.

Willard, p.4

Very likely, he was one of those who sat in silent contempt,  
angry at Jesus for breaking the Sabbath laws.

If he did, he now had a change of heart, putting his beliefs aside,  
because his precious 12 year old daughter was desperately ill  
and her life was at stake.

‘When you know somebody, it makes a difference...’

He saw Jesus perform a miracle of healing in his synagogue just the day before –  
so he knew Jesus could help.

Jesus immediately goes with the man as everyone crowds around to follow.

In the midst of this jostling multitude,

a woman who had suffered for 12 years with a menstrual condition,  
comes up behind Jesus to touch his clothes – and she is healed.

But she is embarrassed for breaking ritual law by touching Jesus –  
making him ritually unclean, so she tries to hide.

Yet Jesus searches for her and finds her – just like God found Jonah,  
and Jesus insists she speak publicly about how she was healed.

Though the Gospel writer omits her name and what she said,

I believe she is even more significant – in that she could very well

have been the mother of the 12 year old girl Jesus was on his way to help.

When he arrives at the synagogue leader’s home, he finds the girl had already died,  
but Jesus takes her by the hand and gently tells her to get up –  
and she comes back to life.

Then, Jesus tells her parents to give her something to eat;

In doing so, this set of Gospel stories about a day in the life of Jesus,

comes to an end it began – with healing the afflicted, feeding the hungry,  
and restoring community.

Jesus was accused of not honoring the Sabbath laws,

but in the course of this particular Sabbath day,

he fed hungry people, healed those who were  
deformed, mentally ill, chronically afflicted and outcast;

He raised a little girl back to life, and  
changed the heart of her father, the religious leader of Capernaum.

Jesus encountered a variety of ‘multitudes’ throughout that Sabbath day –

his hungry disciples, the hard-hearted synagogue, the evil Legion,

the fearful non-Jewish people, the people of Capernaum,

and a family in distress – all kinds of people in their diversity and complexity,  
‘no matter who [they were] or where [they were] on life’s journey’.

Willard, p.5

Jesus is like the sower of his parable –

but in the parable, Jesus doesn't say who prepared the good soil  
by breaking up the hard-packed dirt of prejudice and indifference,  
by pulling out the rocks of poverty and materialism,  
and by pulling up the weeds of mental and physical illness.

Jesus left that job for us to do.

Our church – with its variety of activities through worship, fellowship, and mission,  
is a place where we can serve God in ways Christ demonstrated

as worthy of the Sabbath day;

and in the way that God taught Jonah to care for others – even his enemies,  
healing Jonah in the process from his despair and  
teaching him to love his own life again, just by caring for a plant.

Today, we are celebrating the planting of this church as a congregation of  
the United Church of Christ at The Villages.

One of our guests is The Rev. Andy White who represented

the Cornerstone building & loan ministry of the United Church of Christ  
when we sought to secure a loan to build this building;

and he shared some of his recollections of that experience:

Andy remembers that our building committee and *leadership core* were dedicated,  
and they persevered to *stay on task* and *cope with the set backs, changes,*  
*and ... challenges that were thrown at them.*

From his *standpoint as the lender*, he said

*our project was one of the easiest he worked with.*

*Our building committee listened to... advice and did not lose the vision.*

Andy said he used to look forward to his *phone conversations* with our committee,  
which did not simply *ask for answers but* for his perspective

*on possible solutions and scenarios they had already worked out.*

And he praised Bill Wealand's *pastoral leadership as well as...*

*the congregation's faith and commitment* to the goal of establishing  
a UCC congregation at The Villages.

That work is done and now people will come to our church

because of what we do here in this sacred space,

in the Villages-area, and beyond – on Sundays and throughout the week.

May we grow like fields of grain that have been prepared

by breaking up the hard-packed soil of prejudice,

by pulling out the rocks of shallow thinking,

by pulling up the weeds of fear, in order to prepare the ground – and hearts  
to be open and affirming of all God's people

as a progressive message to The Villages-area.

Willard, p.6

May we as a church grow 30 times, 60 times, and a 100 times  
as much as was planted, just like Jesus' parable and  
just like Pete Seeger's version of the 'Garden Song'...

[http://www.lyricsmania.com/garden\\_song\\_lyrics\\_pete\\_seeger.html](http://www.lyricsmania.com/garden_song_lyrics_pete_seeger.html)[adapted from Peter Seeger's version of song by David Mallet (1975)]...

*Inch by inch, row by row, Gonna make this garden grow.  
Gonna mulch it deep and low, Gonna make it fertile ground.  
Inch by inch, row by row, Please bless these seeds {we} sow.  
Please keep them safe below 'Til the rain comes tumbling down.*

*Pullin' weeds and pickin' stones, We are made of dreams and bones  
Need {a} spot to call {our} own Cause the time is close at hand.  
Grain for grain, sun and rain {we' ll} find {our} way in nature's chain  
Tune {our} body and {our} brain To the music of the land.*

*[Inch by inch, row by row, Gonna make this garden grow.  
Gonna mulch it deep and low, Gonna make it fertile ground.  
Inch by inch, row by row, Please bless these seeds {we} sow.  
Please keep them safe below 'Til the rain comes tumbling down.]*

O God, please bless these seeds we sow...

Amen

*Our lesson today is from Jonah 3:10-4:11,  
and it tells us that there is more to the story than a whale...*

[3:10] When God saw that the people [of Nineveh] had stopped doing evil things,  
he had pity and did not destroy them as he had planned.

[4:1] Jonah was really upset and angry.

[2] So he prayed:

“Our Lord, I knew from the very beginning  
that you wouldn’t destroy Nineveh.

That’s why I left my own country and headed for Spain.

You are a kind and merciful God, and you are very patient.

You always show love, and you don’t like to punish anyone,  
not even foreigners.

[3] Now let me die! I’d be better off dead.”

[4] The Lord replied,

“What right do you have to be angry?”

[5] Jonah then left through the east gate of the city  
and made a shelter to protect himself from the sun.

He sat under the shelter,

waiting to see what would happen to Nineveh.

[6] The Lord made a vine grow up

to shade Jonah’s head and protect him from the sun.

Jonah was very happy to have the vine,

[7] but early the next morning the Lord sent a worm  
to chew on the vine, and the vine dried up.

[8] During the day the Lord sent a scorching wind,  
and the sun beat down on Jonah’s head, making him feel faint.

Jonah was ready to die, and he shouted,

“I wish I were dead!”

[9] But the Lord asked,

“Jonah, do you have the right to be angry about the vine?”

“Yes, I do,” he answered,

“and I’m angry enough to die.”

[10] But the Lord said:

“You are concerned about a vine that you did not plant or take care of,  
a vine that grew up in one night and died the next.

[11] In that city of Nineveh there are more than  
a hundred twenty thousand people

who cannot tell right from wrong,

and many cattle are also there.

Don’t you think I should be concerned about that big city?

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words.*

*Inspired by Mark 2:23-28*

NOW, JESUS ARRIVED ON THE SABBATH DAY,  
GOING THROUGH FIELDS OF WHEAT.

AND HIS DISCIPLES HAD COME ALONG  
AND PROCEEDED TO PLUCK HEADS OF GRAIN TO EAT.

NOW, THE PHARISEES SAID TO HIM,

“SEE HERE! WHY ARE THEY DOING WORK THAT IS  
NOT PERMISSABLE ON THE SABBATH?”

AND JESUS SAID TO THEM,

“DON’T YOU RECALL WHAT DAVID DID,  
WHEN HE WAS DESPERATE AND HUNGRY?  
AND FOR THOSE WHO FOLLOWED HIM?

WHEN ABIATHUR WAS HIGH PRIEST,  
HOW WAS IT RIGHT FOR DAVID TO ENTER THE HOUSE OF GOD  
AND EAT THE CONSECRATED BREAD  
WHICH NO ONE BUT THE HIGH PRIEST IS PERMITTED TO EAT?  
YET HE ATE IT, AS WELL AS THOSE WHO FOLLOWED HIM.”

AND HE SAID TO THEM ALL,

“THE SABBATH WAS CREATED FOR THE SAKE OF HUMANITY  
AND NOT HUMANITY FOR THE SAKE OF THE SABBATH –  
THEREFORE, THE ONE WHO IS THE SON OF MAN,  
THE TRUE HEIR OF HUMANITY,  
IS ALSO THE LORD OF THE SABBATH,  
THE DAY FOR REMEMBERING THE MULTITUDES OF CREATION.”