

“To Be Born Again”

The Rev Drew Willard
UCC@The Villages, FL
March 20th, 2011

Jonah 2:1-10

John 3:1-17

“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God
from the belly of the fish, saying,

“I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried,
and you heard my voice.” ’

Jonah 2:1

Let us pray... O God,

You remember us in the time of our distress and
search for us in our gloom to call us into the light of truth.

In the time of challenge, you call us into being –
you call us to be true to our best selves.

Amen

We cannot take it for granted these days that everyone in our society
knows who David and Goliath are, for example.

It is likely that most –

if not all of you before hearing our children sermon today,
did know the story of Jonah and the whale;
Or at the least, that Jonah was swallowed by a whale
and survived.

But you may not have known *why* he got into that situation.

For you see, he was running away from God
who had intended to send him on a mission of peace
to the enemies of his people.

Jonah was a prophet, but even prophets have issues
and Jonah was trying to avoid them.

He did not want to forgive his enemies,
because he couldn't imagine they could change and be trusted.
So, he sailed away for the farthest place known back then –
which happened to be Spain, the very edge of the known world.

God sent the whale to bring him back – to bring him back to his senses
and teach him something.

But there was more to this story than the part about the whale,
because Jonah was very stubborn and God had to use
just about all of Creation to get Jonah's attention.

Willard, p.2

Besides the whale, God sent the wind to cause a tempest on the ocean,
threatening the boat that was carrying Jonah away.

When Jonah told the crew he was running away from God,
they tried to sail against the rough seas, but finally –
and reluctantly, they set him adrift.

So, the whale was sent to save Jonah in the storm –
and it was while he was in the dark recesses of that whale's
digestive tract, that Jonah prayed to God for help.

And God rescued him by having the whale – or 'big fish',
cough him back up onto land and set him back on the road
to Nineveh.

Though Jonah did what he was told
and preached to the people of Nineveh.
so they all turned from their evil ways
and were converted to peace – Jonah's heart was not in it.

He made a lean-to on a hill overlooking the city
to watch and wait for them to go back to their old ways
and get the punishment they deserved.

So, God sent the Sun
to shine down and stifle Jonah with the heat.

Then, God sent a leafy plant
to cool Jonah by shading him from the Sun.

Finally, God sent an insect
to cause that plant to wither away during the night –
and that made the difference!

Because of the dying plant, Jonah experienced grief.

The Book of Jonah ends with a question – God asks Jonah,
“Shouldn't I care for Nineveh with all its thousands of people
who don't know what they're doing all the time?
And shouldn't I also care for their cattle, their animals, as well?”

It took all of Creation to get Jonah's attention –
to show him there was a wider world filled with others
who were worthy of acceptance.

God opened Jonah's eyes with the knowledge of compassion –
unlike Adam & Eve who saw only their shame
and the fear of others.

Willard, p.3

The challenge to Jonah – and all of us, is to see others
as being like ourselves, worthy of respect and love
even when they are different – even when they're enemies.

I believe that is the challenge particularly
facing traditional – let alone fundamentalist Christianity
as feminist theology, gay theology, black theology –
liberation theologies strive for acceptance within the tradition.

These groups seeking liberation, affirmation, acceptance
are really about defining a “new normal” for what it means
to be human – and as a Christian, to be ‘born again’.

Let me share some thoughts I have had about being ‘born again’ –
For a long time, gay people have been considered to be outsiders,
yet we know from world history that there have always been
people who were gay.

And historically, American society has been unjust to gay people,
yet – in more recent times, also reflective and self-critical
in a responsible way that is leading to social change.

And we of the United Church of Christ are direct descendants
of those first Pilgrims who sought religious freedom
and practiced cultural tolerance.

We are part of a movement that is helping to establish
a new normal for what it means to be a Christian –
in true protestant or “protest-ant” tradition.

In that regard, it has occurred to me that a person
who has ‘come out’ to acknowledge being gay
stands as a paragon to be followed
as opposed to a pariah to be shunned.

Think of it! Think of what gay people risk to declare their identity
or to proclaim love and loyalty for another person
of the same gender.

This can mean broken relationships from family and friends,
the loss of a job, social exclusion, even death.

It is the courage to face such risk in order to live an authentic life,
that should rightfully be admired as an example for all people
to become who they are – to simply be oneself.

And isn't this what it really means to be ‘born again’ –
or ‘born from above’?

Willard, p.4

Someday, God willing, gay people won't face the same risks
in a society where a "new normal" is achieved –
though, gay people will then be just as prone to leading
inauthentic lives of conformity like any "normal" person.
But for now we have their example for all of us to follow –
to renounce what is false and unworthy of yourself,
to find your own voice and the courage to be yourself
no matter what the odds and so, be born anew.

It is in the darkness of night when Nicodemus seeks out Jesus to ask,
'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do
apart from the presence of God.'

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and Jesus would have been perceived
by the Pharisees as a threat to the status quo.

In a way, Nicodemus as a Pharisee was in the same boat – so to speak,
as Jonah over and against the people of Nineveh.

And Jesus teaches Nicodemus that to see the Kingdom of God
one must be born again, leaving prejudice and conformity.
In the process of accepting others in their diversity – even enemies,
you can accept yourself for your own uniqueness and failings.

Paul Tillich – one of the great theologians of the 20th Century, wrote,
*We experience moments in which we accept ourselves,
because we feel that we have been accepted
by that which is greater than we.*

*If only more such moments were given to us!
For it is such moments that make us love our life,
that make us accept ourselves,
not in our goodness and self- complacency,
but in our certainty of the eternal meaning of our life.
We cannot force ourselves to accept ourselves.
We cannot compel anyone to accept himself [or herself].
But sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say
"yes" to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole,
that self-hate and self-contempt disappear,
and that our self is reunited with itself.
Then we can say that grace has come upon us.*

Willard, p.5

And as it says in John 3:16,

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.’

And God still loves the world and that means each of us –
God loves you as is; God loves you and accepts you
for who you are.

Each Sunday following the sermon,
you have the opportunity for silent reflection
to be with God – even to be born again.

This is as close to an altar call as we get here at
UCC at The Villages.

So, you are invited to use this time to be with God as you need to
and come out of your shell, come out of the storm,
come out from whatever dis-ease oppresses you
and claim your salvation, liberation, acceptance –
claim your kinship with Christ and humanity
as a true human being who is loved by God.

Accept that you are already accepted.

Amen

Jonah 2:1-10

2:1 Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God

from the belly of the fish, saying,

'I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

3 You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,

and the flood surrounded me;

all your waves and your billows passed over me.

4 Then I said,

"I am driven away from your sight;

how shall I look again upon your holy temple?"

5 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;

weeds were wrapped around my head

6 at the roots of the mountains.

I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever;

yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.

7 As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;

and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.

8 Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.

9 But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;

what I have vowed I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!

10 Then the Lord spoke to the fish,

and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.

John 3:1-17

3:1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus,
a leader of the Jews.

2He came to Jesus by night and said to him,
‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God;
for no one can do these signs that you do
apart from the presence of God.’

3Jesus answered him,
‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God
without being born from above.’

4Nicodemus said to him,
‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?
Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb
and be born?’

5Jesus answered,
‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God
without being born of water and Spirit.

6What is born of the flesh is flesh,
and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.

7Do not be astonished that I said to you,
“You must be born from above.”

8The wind blows where it chooses,
and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know where it comes from
or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’

9Nicodemus said to him,
‘How can these things be?’

10Jesus answered him,
‘Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet
you do not understand these things?

11 ‘Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know
and testify to what we have seen;
yet you do not receive our testimony.

12If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe,
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

13No one has ascended into heaven
except the one who descended from heaven,
the Son of Man.

14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.

17 ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world
to condemn the world,
but in order that the world might be saved
through him.’

Jesus said that, to enter the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community,
we must be born of water and of the spirit.

For Christians this is the ritual of baptism by water
but it is also the baptism by fire of life experience
as we live out our life of faith.

Rather than a once and for all cleansing of sins,
baptism can also be thought of
as a perilous sea journey through watery chaos.

Just as Moses as a baby was rescued from the Nile waters
and how later he himself would guide
multitudes across the Red Sea,
so Jonah was carried through dangerous waters
to safety and a new perspective of the world around him
as it really is – and that the Kingdom is a social reality
that can be discovered ‘on earth as it is in heaven’.