17th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows- 1967

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

Jonah 1: 1,2 Now the Word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me."

## THE RELUCTANT PROPHET

Among fishermen, the story of the big one that got away is commonplace. But the story in reverse of the man who got himself hooked by a whopping big fish and got away — THAT'S NEWS. But there is an even greater NEW'S STORY in the book of Jonah than this. Despite the fact that this happened some 2300 years ago, it is as up-to-date at tomorrow's newspaper.

I have deliberately chosen this story of the RELUCTANT PROPHET as our text this morning, because it describes in startling, graphic terms the problems of bigotry, segregation, and false pride which we heard before in TODAY'S GOSPEL LESSON. The problem of Jonah and the sin that sent Jesus Christ to the Cross is still very much with us. Let's listen to the ~~message~~ story of Jonah - all the while praying that God might move our stoney hearts to some real concern.

Some time after their return from Babylonian exile the people of Israel, hardened rather than chastened by that harrowing experience, were turning in upon themselves as the only people in the world upon whom God could possibly look with favor. In that period THE WORD OF THE LORD CAME TO JONAH THE SON OF AMITTAI, SAYING, "ARISE, GO TO NINEVEH, THAT GREAT CITY, AND CRY AGAINST IT, FOR THEIR WICKEDNESS HAS COME UP BEFORE ME." It was surely a resonable request to ask of any of God's prophets. But Jonah's reaction is peculiar. He runs away; gets himself down to a handy seaport and hops a boat for Spain.

Why did Jonah run away? It was certainly not because he was asked to preach God's judgment upon the ~~people~~ assyrian of Nineveh. The Assyrians were long time and hated enemies of the Jews, for whom Jonah certainly had no sympathy. Someone might suggest that Jonah may have been afraid. After all, if the Word of the Lord came to you today to arise and go to Moscow, or Red China, or even downtown to the ghetto of the inner city and CRY AGAINST IT BECAUSE OF ITS WICKEDNESS, you might think twice about it too and perhaps hop a boat for the Hawaiian Islands instead. But Jonah was no coward.

The reason Jonah ran away was because Jonah WAS afraid - NOT of what might happen to him, BUT of what might happen to the people of Nineveh. He was afraid they might repent - and God, instead of punishing them, would forgive them. If Jonah had been sure that God would stick to His justice and the inevitable punishment of evildoers like the Assyrians - no doubt he would have gone. But he didn't trust God's love. God was too apt to forgive the wrong people! And so he ran away. Jonah should have known better, of course. He went on board ship, climbed into his bunk and fell asleep. But God caught up with him in a storm at sea. And the frantic sailors and their captain - fearing for their lives - woke him up - suspecting that Jonah was the cause of it all. And he was.

You cannot escape from God - it seems silly to try. He always does catch up with us sooner or later in some storm of life - whether it be a civilization, a nation, or an individual like you and me. God has caught up with us Christian white people in the storm of the large-scale revolution on the part of the colored people of our country who are in revolt against the double standard of values between white and colored. There is segregation - the problems of the public schools - civil rights - riots - crime and delinquency, juvenile and adult. Plenty of facts, for what they are worth; and who knows what to do about any of them? Meanwhile, for God's sake, WHAT'S A MAN WORTH? I put it to you: How many of us, anywhere on this sad earth, ever undertake with any seriousness at all - with even the most fleeting sense of gratitude - TO LOVE GOD; NOT in His majesty, as Luther once said, BUT IN HIS CREATURES? And the dreadful account keeps piling up.* THERE WAS A CERTAIN MAN BEFORE HIM WHICH HAD THE DROPSY....AND HE TOOK HIM, AND HEALED HIM, AND LET HIM GO; AND ANSWERED THEM, SAYING, 'WHICH OF YOU...?' He still wants to know. Without even a moment's hesitation they would break even the Sabbath law to drag an ass or an ox out of a pit. But this sick man - every bit as much a child of God as any of them, and a good deal worse off than anybody or anything in a pit - they had absolutely no comapassion for him. How many dogs and cats are treated a good deal better today than fellow human beings - with half of the world going to bed hungry? There is no escape from God. You know it and so do I. And so did Jonah!

Father Gruppi
St. Paul

For Jonah it came in the peril to the lives of these pagan sailors - these pagans whom Jonah had come to despise. But now in the crisis of the storm at sea threatening their lives, they were for Jonah no longer pagans, but PERSONS. They were men like himself - with lives to live - with wives and children at home facing bereavement - PERSONS capable of dreams and sympathy, even heroism! When Jonah offered to throw himself overboard to calm the storm, these pagan sailors would have none of it - but rowed all the harder in a vain attempt to bring the ship to land to save Jonah as well as themselves. PREJUDICE breaks down as the crisis of survival shakes men down to their common humanity. So Jonah, his unrelenting hatred of the pagans broken by the realization that these sailors were human beings like himself, had himself thrown overboard to save their lives.

If that had been the end of Jonah, no doubt seaports all over the world would be dotted with little Jonah Chapels dedicated to this brave Hebrew prophet who gave his life to save the lives of those pagan sailors. But this was NOT the end of Jonah. God still had Nineveh and its wickedness on His hands. And God was not through with Jonah either. So enters the GREAT FISH whom God appointed to SWALLOW UP JONAH and to cast him up a little later on the shore. This incident of the great fish indicates that God's purpose is never completely thwarted.... The RELUCTANT PROPHET had been brought to the point where he had been willing to change his mind and accept God's point of view with respect to a few pagans. But the question of his hatred of the Assyrians as a people was still not resolved.

You know how it is with us. There are levels of prejudice like everything else. You and I can reach the level where we say we will take each individual of whatever race or color and let him PROVE HIMSELF on his own merits - and then we pat ourselves on the back for our broad-mindedness! But the very fact that we start with the presupposition that each individual has to prove his worth to us first, indicates that we have not yet reached the mind of God.

So again God's call came to Jonah to GO UP TO NINEVEH, THAT GREAT CITY, AND CRY AGAINST IT FOR ITS WICKEDNESS. This time Jonah went, preaching destruction within 40 days unless the city repented. And WHAT A PREACHER he must have been,

this RELUCTANT PROPHET! Not even Billy Graham has done as well. Everyone from the king on down put on sackcloth and ashes in the hope that God would relent. And God did relent and forgave NINEVEH its wickedness.

But Jonah was anything but pleased with the success of his preaching! What he had feared from the very beginning had happened. God's love was not to be trusted. IT WENT TOO FAR. It included everyone - even the enemies of His chosen people. It lacked discrimination, this LOVE OF GOD - it had no taste.... So Jonah went out of the city and sulked - his bitterness at God increased by a flaming sun beating down with a hot desert wind. So God took pity and had a plant grow up to shade Jonah's head. And like all of us when we're out of sorts - if we get physically comfortable - life does not seem quite so unbearable as it did before. But the next day God had a caterpillar destroy the plant and in the heat of the sun Jonah's bitterness returned and he finally blurted out that he was angry enough to die. Whereupon God prodded him: DO YOU DO WELL TO BE ANGRY, JONAH YOU SPEND YOUR PITY ON THIS POOR WITHERED PLANT FOR WHICH YOU HAVE NO RESPONSIBILITY AT ALL. SHOULD NOT I PITY THOSE IGNORANT AND CONFUSED THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE IN NINEVEH? This is how the story ends: with pagan Nineveh repentant and forgiven - and Jonah, man of God, squatting on his haunches, sulking outside the city.

What shall we make of it? Is it so difficult for us to understand Jonah's attitude? Surely there is many a man who is sulking outside the church today - bitter because God did not act in his life the way he thought God ought to act!

But what of us within the church? How easily we come to the conclusion that certain people are undesirable - they wouldn't fit in with our type ~~of congregation and life~~. And from there it is an easy matter to start manipulating God's love and judgment - deciding who shall and who shall not be saved - and determining whether this group or that is actually worth our time and effort.

Do you remember how it was with our Lord? His biggest problem was not with the riffraff, the sinners, the adulterers, and social outcasts. He often found them to be the very best people - potentially! His biggest problem was with the good, decent, church people who were so sure of heaven that God was only waiting

for their triumphal entry - ready as they were to go barging right up to the head table in the celestial banquethall. Christ's love, too, lacked discriminatio and taste - it could scarcely tell right from wrong, good people from bad!

Have we ever stopped to consider what it means that HE DIED FOR ALL? -- FOR ALL! -- for every last man, woman, and child on this planet of ours. They are all precious to Him. He shed His precious blood that the people of every race and kindred, and people, and tongue might hear the Good News of forgiveness and life in His Name - that they might repent and be saved. Certainly that includes you and me - but it also includes all the other people on God's earth to whom we are called to minister! This is not time for us to be reluctant prophets - or at the last we may find ourselves ~~weeping and~~ like Jonah sulking OUTSIDE the heavenly city! THERE SHALL BE WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH. O God, give us the heart, and the mind, and the love of Christ! Amen.