

“Two Hearts Worlds Apart”

Today we are going to talk about the great divergence, the great gap, which can exist between the heart of God and the heart of man. Thus I have entitled this message “Two Hearts Worlds Apart.”

There are many things in our lives today that remind us of this great gap that exists between us and God.

There are things that we get far more passionate about than we do about the gospel of God.

Yesterday Alabama played LSU. The winner of that game is now supposed to be on the fast track for the national championship. Malia told me the other night as we were getting ready for bed that the game was like Christmas for Alabama fans. She told me that all the hotels within a two hundred mile radius of Tuscaloosa were booked for the weekend.

More the serious side of things I have recently been reading a book by the late John Leith; the most well known theologian in the mainline Presbyterian Church in the last 50 years. Toward the end of his life he wrote a book called *“Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education.”* In it he bemoaned the wayward drift of our Presbyterian seminaries, and here I quote what he had to say about what people are passionate about on our seminary campuses.

Furthermore there is little evidence of any passionate proclamation of the foundational convictions of the Christian faith, or of the Christian gospel of what God has done for the salvation of human beings. Passionate convictions do exist on seminary campuses, but they frequently find their most vigorous expression in the advocacy of causes such as the agenda of the feminist movement, or the black caucus, or left wing political organizations. There is little evidence that seminary faculties have a similar passion for proclaiming the foundational doctrines of Christian faith in a secular culture. (pg. 10)

Thinking like this puts a whole new twist on the words of the prophet Isaiah spoken in the Old Testament.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isa 55:8-9)

It is true that because of our mixed up passions our thoughts and ways are not God’s thoughts and ways. Because of our sin, God’s ways and our ways are often worlds apart.

The Difference between God's Heart and Jonah's Heart

Today, as we come to a close on this series of sermons from the book of Jonah, we are reminded once again of that reality.

The end of the book of Jonah shows us just how far apart the heart of God and the heart of man are.

What breaks God's heart and what breaks Jonah's heart are two very different things.

What makes God angry and what makes Jonah angry are two different things.

It's not the first time we have seen this. It is a recurring theme in the book of Jonah.

You remember how it started off. God called Jonah, a Jew, to go to the people of Nineveh, the enemy of Israel, and preach his gospel to them. Jonah refused to go. Unlike God, Jonah was not interested in the souls of the Assyrians. As far as Jonah was concerned Assyria, the hated enemies of the Jews, could burn in hell, but as far as God was concerned He was desirous of the Ninevites repenting from their wickedness and turning to the one true living God, who had revealed Himself to Israel for the sake of the world. God had a heart for the Ninevites and Jonah didn't.

This running from God's heart caused the prophet Jonah to be swallowed up by a great fish, and to be spewed out on land three days later. God gave Jonah a second chance to align his heart with God's heart.

Well it happened. Jonah repented, sort of.

He finally went to the great city of Nineveh, and he proclaimed the word the Lord had given him to proclaim and the Ninevites repented. Even the king of Nineveh repented, and the Bible tells us that when God saw what Nineveh did, God changed his mind. That is to say that God himself repented. Not that God repented from sin because God is sinless, but rather God repented from the wrath and judgment that He had stored up for this wicked people. God changed His mind about the calamity that He was going to execute on Nineveh and God gave them grace instead.

Jonah's sermon had worked, sort of.

It worked for those whom it was intended. The message was for the Ninevites and they heeded the Word of God that Jonah had proclaimed to them. But the message did not work on the one

who preached it. The sermon is always a two way street. It is supposed to speak to both the hearer and the preacher. But in this case the preacher was not listening.

Jonah was angry about the results of his preaching. Nineveh repented and Jonah was red hot mad. As many dying churches as we have today it's hard to imagine that a preacher would get mad over someone repenting, but Jonah did.

Deep down he knew that the God of Israel, the one true God of the world and all people, was that kind of God. The God of Israel was not just a God of wrath and judgment, though He is that, but Yahweh, the LORD, is also a gracious God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and quite ready to relent from punishing those who would repent and turn to Him.

Jonah knew this. He knew it personally. For God had already shown him great mercy the first time he ran from Him, when God swallowed him up in a great fish. Jonah was saved and he did not deserve it.

Jonah also knew it historically. For in the history of his own people, the Israelites, God bent over backwards to give Israel much grace in the midst of all of her rebellion and repeated failures. This God was a merciful, gracious, and compassionate God, and Jonah did not like it.

Jonah's Failure to Repent and to Value What God Values

So the first way we see this huge gap between God and man in this story is we see it in Jonah's refusal to repent.

This is ironic because in our modern culture one of the most common charges leveled against the God of the Bible is the charge that He is not Merciful and gracious, especially the God who is portrayed in the Old Testament, but rather harsh and judgmental. But the irony is that it is not God who is the One who is unwilling to repent, it is us!

God will repent and give mercy, grace, and compassion to anyone who comes to Him in humble faith and repentance. We see this most clearly and decisively in the God/man Jesus.

In Jesus Christ God repents from the wrath that He has stored up for our sin, and He takes that wrath that was meant for us and He places it upon Himself, so that His justice might be satisfied and His grace given through the cross. On the cross God gives mercy and forgiveness to any sinner who would come to him.

So really it is we sinners, not God, who are the ones who are so *unwilling* to repent.

We are more like Jonah than any of us would care to admit.

We withhold the gospel of God from people every day. Why? Because we are Universalists who think that everyone is saved, and that there is no such thing as hell? I hope not, but maybe. Why? Because we don't want the people we dislike to be in our church? I hope not, but maybe. Why? Because we don't think the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change a person's life? I hope not but maybe.

You see it is we sinners who are in need of repentance. Repentance from leaving this work of proclaiming the gospel to just a few, as the Affirmation of Faith that we have been using these past few weeks says. "We repent of leaving this work to a few, and we rejoice that the Spirit is waking us to see our mission in God's world."

The other way that we see the gap between us and God is in the difference between the things that God cares about and the things that men care about.

I began the message that way with the example of the passion that many of us have about sports, but in the story of Jonah we see it in the anger that overcame him when the bush died.

So here's how it went. The Ninevites repented and turned to the God of Israel. Jonah gets angry and he runs again. God questions him. "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah does not answer this question, but rather runs out of the city and wishes to die. But God causes a bush to grow over Jonah and gives him shade. This makes Jonah happy. Apparently, he had second thoughts about dying as he was wasting away in the sun. But then a worm attacks the bush and it withers and dies. Once again Jonah is left scorching in the heat and he prays to die.

At this point God confronts Jonah again. "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Jonah's reply, "Yes, angry enough to die." God then tells him that if you are that angry about the bush, if you care that much about its fate, then what makes you think that I should not be infinitely more concerned about the fate of the Ninevites? For they are far more important to me than the bush that just died over your head.

In the end of Jonah we see, first and foremost, the self-centeredness of the prophet. He is only grateful for the mercy that God gave him, and not the mercy that God gave to the Ninevites. And then second, see that Jonah is more concerned about the bush than he is the souls of the people who are lost.

The way this story winds up reminds me of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy." (Matt. 6:19)

Conclusion

We Christians can easily let our priorities get out of whack when we care more about earthly things or ourselves than we do the things of God. We can care more about a football game or a political cause than we do the Bible, the church, prayer, and lost souls. God calls us to repent today and to care for things that God cares about, and to let our hearts break over the things that break the heart of God. That is one of the great lessons of the book of Jonah, and that is why God leaves us hanging with a question at the end.

“Jonah, you feel sorry for the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and it died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness...Should not I feel sorry for such a great city?” (v. 10-11)

Forest Park Presbyterian Church what breaks your heart?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen