

Today we come to the final message in our Awkward Family Photos summer series. I hope you have enjoyed hearing from some of the gifted people who are part of our Awkward Family.

I want to show you a couple of my awkward family photos. (Mom and step dad, Ralph.) Ralph and I didn't get off to a very good start. My mom left my dad after 34 years of marriage to marry her old high school sweetheart Ralph. They not only dated in high school but they competed together on the "tumbling team." I think tumbling was a kind of artistic gymnastics from what I can tell from these pictures...AWKWARD!

So, my mom divorced my dad to become Ralph's fourth wife. I did not like the man. One Sunday, I finished a sermon from the book of Nehemiah with a challenge. Nehemiah led God's people to gather stones from the rubble around Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. I mentioned that God was building a temple out of living stones and our task was to gather living stones lost in the rubble of society and incorporate them into this building called the church. I gave each person a stone to represent someone who was not part of God's family and asked them to place it in a prominent place as a reminder to pray that they would come to Christ so they would be part of God's eternal building. I took a stone and prayed reluctantly for Ralph.

Ralph retired early to pursue his lifelong dream of being a craps dealer in Vegas. One day my mom called to tell us she and Ralph were leaving Las Vegas and moving to Texas...to our town...to our street! It made no sense. There were no casinos in our town and we lived in a dry county. I thought those would be deal breakers to Ralph but they came. Bad turned worse when mom and Ralph started coming to church, to MY church. Don't you hate it when that happens?!

If you are acquainted with the scriptures you know that I am not the first reluctant prophet in history. There is a little book in the Bible called Jonah that describes an awkward response to an awesome God. Jonah was a prophet who was given the assignment to go and preach to a godless, blood-thirsty people. So, he boarded a ship and sailed away - in the wrong direction. He was thrown overboard and saved by a great fish. The fish delivered him on a beach where Jonah reluctantly decided he should do what God called him to do. To his surprise and dismay, the people repented. Jonah pouted. The story ends with Jonah arguing with God. It is an awkward story - a man of God doing everything he can to escape the task of sharing the Good News of God's glorious grace with a lost and dying culture. The point of the story is simple - God relentlessly pursues the reluctant. He relentlessly pursues unbelieving sinners, while ruthlessly perfecting unbelieving believers. Resist His call if you will but **WHEN YOU RESIST, GOD WILL PERSIST**. God's relentless love is more powerful than our reluctant obedience.

I want to just do a flyover of the book of Jonah this morning and reflect on these two primary themes: the compassionate character of God, and the degree to which their own character reflects His compassion.

God refines us in unexpected ways through unexpected means. In the book of Jonah God uses four unconventional messengers to change the heart of His reluctant servant.

1. God refines us through impossible assignments...1:1-3. Assyria was a superpower known for their brutality and immorality. They worshipped the goddess, Ishtar, with the accompanying cult prostitution. They were a blood thirsty empire that had refined the art of torture. Nations feared them. Nineveh was the largest city in the Assyrian Empire. Nahum 3:1 describes Nineveh with words you will never see on a post card, *"Greetings from Nineveh: the city of blood, full of lies and stolen goods, never without victims!"* Nobody in their right mind would sign up for this assignment. Jonah didn't mind being a prophet of God so long as he only had to deal with people who were like him, people who deserved God's love.

There is a Jonah in all of us. We have all been around difficult people, dangerous people, mean people. Have you ever said, "God, I didn't sign up for this! I wanted to get married but all this drama? I wanted kids but not necessarily THESE kids. I wanted to be a shepherd but you didn't tell me that sheep bite." Six months after I came to Fellowship..."I think I've made a big mistake." This book exposes the limits of one man's faith when put to the test, his disappointment with God and the unraveling of his inner life.

Did you know you can serve God while struggling with God at the same time? There was a major conflict in Jonah's soul. He was angry, depressed, frustrated with God. It is not uncommon for those who throw themselves into God's service to experience intense inner conflict. Augustine, Luther, Spurgeon, Moody, Mother Teresa, Mr. Rogers! Pray for Kurt and Martha!

2. God refines us through impulsive mistakes. Jonah ran, not out of fear of failure but out of fear of fairness. He knew that God might save the Ninevites. Jonah suffered from a classic case of ADD - Assyrian Derangement Disorder. His hatred for the Assyrians was stronger than his love for God. (can a person hate Donald Trump more than they love America?). God took Jonah to school. "And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights." Jonah 1:17. There are some courses you can only take at the University of Whales.

This verse has been the source of a great debate. Could a fish swallow a man? A little girl told her teacher and the teacher said, "Couldn't happen." Little girl insisted and finally said, "When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah." Teacher said, "Well what if Jonah didn't go to heaven?" Little girl thought for a minute and then said, "Then you can ask him!"

The debate is not whether a fish can swallow a man (once you get past Genesis 1:1 the rest is easy) the debate is whether God sent the fish as a means of disciplining His disobedient servant or of saving him from certain drowning. The answer is "both." God, in His severe mercy, often sends us into the deep in order to save us. Jonah needed to experience the mercy of God for himself before he would ever extend that mercy to the people of Nineveh.

God may have you in the belly of the beast for a time. Don't despair. The Holy Spirit's work in us is designed to make us more like Jesus. He uses the events of our daily lives to transform us. Sometimes these lessons seem way too hard. The problem is not that he asks too much of us—the problem is that we settle for too little. Our love for the status quo makes us leery of God's plan for us. This past week Jim Denison wrote an article in which he quoted C. S. Lewis.

In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis observed that we often mask our complacency with a false humility that hinders God's work in us. We resist spiritual growth by thinking (in Lewis's words), "I never expected to be a saint, I only wanted to be a decent ordinary chap." And we imagine when we say this that we are being humble." Lewis calls this attitude "the fatal mistake."

He explains: "Of course we never wanted or asked to be made into the sort of creatures He is going to make us into. But the question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what He intended us to be when He made us...How should we know what He means us to be like?"

Before we were born, we passed through stages in the womb in which we were "rather like vegetables" and then "rather like fish." During those stages Lewis says, "we would have been quite contented to stay as vegetables or fish." That's because we had no idea what we were one day going to become.

Here's his point: "The same is now happening at a higher level. We may be content to remain what we call 'ordinary people': but He is determined to carry out a different plan. To shrink back from that plan is not humility; it is laziness and cowardice or worse, unbelief. To submit to God's plan is not conceit or megalomania; it is obedience."

3. God refines us through improbable results. Nineveh repented...3:5-9. Many observers have pointed out that the greatest miracle in the book of Jonah is not that Jonah was swallowed by a great fish but that the Ninevites actually repented. But our missionary God was just as interested in the Ninevites as He was the Israelites. Jonah would have preached in Nineveh around 759 B.C. Before he arrived, two plagues broke out in the city and there had been a total eclipse of the sun on June 15, 763. God prepared the Ninevites for the arrival of His messenger Jonah.

We don't have much information about the revival in Nineveh because the focus is on Jonah and his hardness of heart. But I can tell you about Ralph's revival. Just before Thanksgiving, Ralph, warned us that his brother was coming to town for a visit. He said, "He hates preachers." We later learned that when Ralph went to pick his brother up at DFW airport, he took with him two cassette tapes of sermons I had preached. When his brother got in the car, Ralph said, "It's two hours from here to my house. I'm going to play these two tapes for you and I want you to listen because THIS IS WHAT I BELIEVE." Ralph had come to believe that Jesus died for him. He struggled with that for the rest of his life, not because he didn't believe the Bible but because he couldn't believe he was the kind of person God could love.

4. God refines us through imponderable dilemmas. You would think Jonah would be thrilled by his evangelistic success but 4:1 says, "It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry." ("But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry." NIV). The book ends with Jonah arguing with God. He still doesn't get the message. I hope you do. There are two parts to it:

a. God relentlessly pursues the lost. No matter the nationality, "God desires for all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth." 1 Tim. 2:4. When Jonah saw that God is gracious he got angry. 4:2-4...Anger is a theme repeated throughout this final chapter.

We do well to pay attention to what makes us angry. Jonah's anger was a symptom of his misalignment with God's will. If he truly valued what God valued he would rejoice at the

response of God to the repentance of the Ninevites. But he did not feel that way. In fact, he said he would rather die than see his enemies saved. In his self-centeredness Jonah was damming up the wells of salvation to water his own garden. Let's remember this morning that "God so loved the world..." There are a lot of Ninevites out there. God loves Ninevites. But there is another important reminder in this book.

b. God ruthlessly perfects the found...Jonah 4:4-9. As Chris said last week, our disappointments are often God's appointments. God's appointments are brought on all through this book. In chapter one, God had mercifully appointed a fish to save Jonah in 1:17. In chapter four, He appointed a plant to give the sulking Jonah shade. He then appointed a worm to kill the plant and ruin Jonah's shade (4:7). He then appointed a hot wind to make Jonah miserable (4:8). Jonah has two responses: he is angry that his shade is gone (4:9), and he pities the dying plant. God now has him where he wants him. "You pity the plant, Jonah? You didn't labor over it; you didn't make it grow; it came and went in one night. But, Jonah, I did labor over Nineveh, I did make it grow, and I've been at work on Nineveh not one night but for years; and shouldn't I pity its 120,000 people and all its cattle? Jonah, forsake your racism. Forsake your skepticism. Forsake your nationalism and follow me. You owe your life to me. Therefore, 'be merciful as your father in heaven is merciful' (Luke 6:36)." (John Piper)

What Jonah wanted was what a lot of people want today - a God created in our own image, who hates all the same people we do.

I want to invite you to do two things this morning:

1. Think of the most unlikely person you know who would become a follower of Christ. Write their name on a prayer card and keep it with you. Lift their name up before the God who loves them more than you ever will.

2. Pray and tell God, "whatever it takes." Are you willing to be transformed into the image of Jesus? Remember, God sent Jonah to Nineveh. He said "no." God sent Jesus to earth. He said "yes." Now it's our turn to say "yes." "Lord, do what you need to do in my life to make me more like Jesus."

When God wants to drill a man,
And thrill a man,
And skill a man
When God wants to mold a man
To play the noblest part;

When He yearns with all His heart
To create so great and bold a man
That all the world shall be amazed,
Watch His methods, watch His ways!

How He ruthlessly perfects
Whom He royally elects!
How He hammers him and hurts him,
And with mighty blows converts him

Into trial shapes of clay which
Only God understands;
While his tortured heart is crying
And he lifts beseeching hands!

How He bends but never breaks
When his good He undertakes;
How He uses whom He chooses,
And with every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him
To try His splendor out-
God knows what He's about.

– Anonymous