

Repentance, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation  
Jonah 3:1–5, 10; Mark 1:14–20  
Sunday, January 24, 2021

For the past three years, I have been working on my doctorate. And the question that I have been pursuing in my thesis project has to do with the fact that Americans are so fiercely *divided* from one another – we are caught in this vicious circle of individualism and polarization that just fuel one another; the more *individualized* we are, cut off from one another (the less we *need* each other or *know* each other), the more *polarized* we become, which only further cuts us off from one another. It’s a cycle that we can’t seem to get out of. And that division, individualization, and polarization has inevitably found its way into the life of the church, so that churches cannot have difficult but necessary conversations about things like race and sexuality and other “political” matters without it becoming polarized.

So my question has been, how can we overcome this cycle of individualization and polarization in a way that helps us live life together and engage in difficult conversations in a way that is faithful and loving? How can we nurture *intimacy* in a culture of individualization, helping people *know* one another and *trust* one another? In the midst of a divided world, how can the church be a place where *all* people belong and are called together by God to *know* and *be known* by their neighbor? How can we actively nurture that kind of environment?

How can we live life together? How can we be made whole?

Those are central questions, not just for my thesis or for the church, but they are central questions for our *country* right now. They are central questions for our *personal* relationships, many of which have been stressed and strained by the political division in our country. And they

are central questions in today's scripture readings. How can we live life together with those with whom we differ and disagree (even those who have *hurt* us)? How can we be made whole?

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The lectionary has us picking up Jonah's story right in the middle. God has told Jonah to go to Nineveh and cry out against their wickedness," but Jonah gets on a ship and goes to Tarshish. Put in a way that makes sense to us today, Jonah is in Israel. God calls him to go to Iraq. Jonah goes to *Spain*, over 2,000 miles away, on the complete opposite side of the Mediterranean Sea! Jonah did this because he is *terrified* of Nineveh and the people who live there. He is terrified of them, because Israel has a long history with Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians had done some *pretty bad things* to the people of Israel. They had invaded and conquered Israel, destroying cities and homes and the Temple and sending the people of Israel off to live in exile. They were *incredibly* violent and bloody and brutal. There's one account in the Old Testament that talks about how the Assyrians invaded a city, and there are "piles of dead, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end – people stumble over the bodies, and the streets are just *filled* with blood." There are so many bodies that you can't even *walk down the street* without *tripping* over them. One commentary on this text says, "Nineveh, with its reputation for violence and terrorism, was a symbol of all that opposed the Lord and the Lord's people."<sup>1</sup> And Jonah's like, "You want me to go to the capital, to the *heart of that?! No thanks.*"

But eventually Jonah *does* go to Nineveh. He walks into the city, cries out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" and it says that the people of Nineveh *believed* God. They proclaimed a fast, and everyone (including the *animals*) put on sackcloth. They *repented*. And

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<sup>1</sup> James Limburg, *Hosea – Micah (Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, pg. 139.

*because* they repented, it says, “God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.” The people *repented*, and God *forgave* them. But Jonah couldn’t quite get there. Jonah sees this happen, and he gets mad. You see, for Jonah, this was payback time! He had wanted God to destroy Nineveh; to get them back for all the pain and suffering they had caused Israel. While *God* might have forgiven them, Jonah *didn’t*. And his story ends with him sitting under a shrub, so angry and unforgiving that he wants to *die*.

Now there are three particular aspects to this story that show us how we can live life together and be made whole with those with whom we differ and disagree, and even those who have hurt us. Those three things are *repentance*, *forgiveness*, and *reconciliation*. And I want to take a minute to break each one of those down a bit, because while we are *familiar* with these ideas, a lot of people have misunderstandings as to exactly how they work.

A lot of times when we hear the word *repentance*, we think of it as *confessing* our sin or feeling *bad* about our sin. And that’s *part* of it. You can’t really repent unless you feel bad about what you have done, and you *acknowledge* or *confess* that you have sinned. But that’s *only* part of it. The word *repent* comes from the Hebrew word *shuv*, which means, “to turn.” It is about turning *away* from your sin and living in a new way. It’s about *reorienting* your life, away from *this* thing that is sinful or harmful or bad, to *this* thing that is healing and lifegiving and good. Repentance is about changing the way you are living. You are no longer going to do *that* thing. You are going to do something *else*. That is what it means to repent; to reorient your life, change your actions, and change the way that you’re living.

Forgiveness is about *letting go* of another person’s sin, of the hurt they have caused you or the wrong that they have done to you. It’s saying, “I’m not going to hold on to this thing anymore or

hold it against you. I'm going to let go of it." That doesn't mean that you are *okay* with it or that it didn't *happen*. It just means that you're not going to invest your energy in holding onto that thing anymore or carrying it around with you. When God forgave us in Christ's death on a cross, God does not hold our sin against us anymore. Our sin does not keep us from God anymore. That is forgiveness.

Reconciliation is about two people who were at odds being made whole and living life together again. But the problem is, a lot of times we confuse forgiveness and reconciliation. We think, "If I forgive this person, that means I have to be in a right relationship with them again, and I don't know if I can *do* that. This person who has hurt me so deeply, I don't know if I can trust them or if I *want* to be in relationship with them anymore." But forgiveness is only *part* of reconciliation. Reconciliation is the *goal*. That is what God wants for all of us, to be reconciled and living in a whole relationship with God and with each other. But reconciliation requires forgiveness *and* repentance. To be made whole with someone, there *has* to be both forgiveness and repentance.

Imagine that you're in a conflict with someone; they have done something to hurt you. If you *forgive* them, but they don't *repent*, they don't change their actions and turn from whatever it was they were doing, they are just taking advantage of your forgiveness. It's like, "I forgive you." "Well, I'm not going to change." That's borderline *abusive*, and the two of you can't experience real reconciliation like that. That's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as cheap grace; forgiveness has been offered, but you just keep doing the same things you were doing before. Your life doesn't *reflect* that forgiveness. There's no reconciliation in that.

On the other side of that, if you're in conflict with someone, and they *repent*, they change their behavior, but you don't *forgive* them, that's a grudge. And you can't be reconciled like that. It's like, "I acknowledge this thing that I have done to hurt you. I'm sorry, and I've changed." "Well, I don't forgive you." There's no reconciliation there. That's exactly what we see with Jonah. The people of Nineveh repent, and *God* forgives them, so they are reconciled with *God*, but *Jonah* doesn't forgive them. Jonah holds a grudge, so Jonah is not reconciled with the people of Nineveh.

Reconciliation requires both *repentance* and *forgiveness*. Sometimes repentance leads to forgiveness – like in Jonah's story; the people of Nineveh repent and *then* God forgives them – and sometimes forgiveness leads to repentance. We are forgiven and *then* that experience of grace does something to us that says, "I want to change." That's what we have experienced in Jesus Christ. Christ died on a cross 2,000 years ago for the forgiveness of all our sin, and when we hear the good news of that forgiveness, it leads us to live in new ways, to change, to turn away from our sin and follow Christ.

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There's a sense in which that's what we see in this story from Mark's gospel. Jesus is going around proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. He comes to Simon and Andrew and then James and John, and Jesus extends this good news to them and says, "Follow me," and they leave everything behind and follow him. They have this unmerited, unearned experience of his grace, and they reorient their lives to him. They turn from this life they *were* living to this new life with him.

So sometimes repentance leads to forgiveness, and sometimes forgiveness leads to repentance. But regardless of the order, both are necessary for reconciliation, and reconciliation is the goal of

God in Jesus Christ. That is God's desire for us. That is what history is moving toward, as Paul says to the Ephesians that God's plan for the fullness of time is to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth. That all things, all people should be gathered up and made one, made whole in Christ. That is the work of the Kingdom of God that we have been called to as followers of Christ – the work of reconciliation; to bring it about in our own lives and in the lives of others.

You'll notice that when Jesus came to James and John, they were in their boat mending the nets. That's how they fished – they used nets to gather up the fish. Sometimes the nets broke, so they had to put them back together. The word Mark uses there for *mending* is the Greek word *katartizo*. It is the same word that Paul uses throughout his letters when he calls Christians to “be united,” to be *one*, to be *whole*. It's this idea that we're taking something that was *broken* and we're putting it back *together*; mending it to restore an original wholeness or unity. Jesus' disciples *had* been using their nets to gather up *fish*, but now Jesus says to them, you are going to help me gather up *people*, to make *them* one, to make *them* whole – “that all things might be gathered up in him.”

That's the kingdom of God. That's the *will* of God. That what is *broken* can be *fixed*. What is *divided* can be *made whole* again. That like those nets, our lives, our relationships can be *mended*. Christ calls us to reorient our lives away from the divisive politics of the kingdom of man to the Kingdom of God; to be about the work of reconciliation, gathering people up so that they might be at one with God and with each other.

Sometimes that is possible in this life. Sometimes there is genuine repentance and genuine forgiveness, and we can overcome the pain of the past to be reconciled and live new lives

together *in this life*. We are called to strive for that; to do everything we can do to make that possible. But sometimes we *can't* be reconciled in this life. Sometimes the pain and the problem is just too deep, and one side isn't willing or able to repent or forgive. You can't control what this other person does. You can't *make* someone else repent or forgive. All you can control is what *you* do and how *you* practice repentance; how *you* extend or seek forgiveness. They may not repent, but you can choose to let go. They may not forgive, but you can choose to change the way you're living.

Reconciliation isn't always possible in this life. But we also trust that this life is not all there is. That the possibility of repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation extends beyond this life into the life that is to come. God's ultimate goal for the fullness of time is for all things to be gathered up and made whole and reconciled in him. There's a quote that gets attributed to a lot of sources, so we're not exactly sure who first said it, but it goes like this, "Everything will be alright in the end. If it's not alright, it's not yet the end." The goal of God's Kingdom is reconciliation, and God will not stop until all things are made whole again. Everything will be reconciled in the end. And if it's not reconciled, it's not yet the end.

So how do we live life together with those with whom we differ and disagree, those who have hurt us? How can we be made whole? It takes repentance *and* forgiveness. It is being *open* to one another, to the possibility that this person can change, that *I* can change, and that with God's grace, we can move forward *together*.