

The Enemy of My Enemy is Love

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2017

Preacher: Matt Wilcoxon

[0 : 00] Thank you. Good evening. It's great to be here with you. Tommy warned me that some of you might be feeling a little tired after the retreat, so he told me to keep this to 60 minutes at a maximum.

So, don't worry. We just seem to need enemies, don't we sometimes? Sometimes there's this ineradicable human tendency to channel our own discontent onto external objects, other people.

It's an innate drive that can bind us together, masquerading as community. It's a primal passion that's fundamentally irrational, but it can always find good reasons to justify its presence in the human heart.

We just gravitate towards seeing the world through this lens of enemy. And it's a perennial tendency that's rearing its ugly head afresh today.

Keith Mines, who works at the U.S. Institute of Peace, who has also been in the Special Forces and worked for the United Nations in places like Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan, he specializes in civil wars.

[1 : 26] And earlier this year, in a piece in The New Yorker, he estimated that the United States faces a 60% chance of a new civil war in the next two decades.

And to substantiate this prediction, he delineated five common factors that he's seen in other places. They were entrenched polarization with no obvious meeting place for resolution, increasingly divisive press coverage and information flows, weakened institutions, notably the legislative and judicial branches, for the abandonment of responsibility by leadership, and five, the legitimization of both rhetorical and physical violence as the means to solve disputes.

Mines isn't the only one sounding the alarm about hatred in our society. A survey this August of five leading civil war historians put the consensus odds of some new form of civil war at 35%.

And one of these historians sagely notes why it is that our leaders seem increasingly to mirror the divisions rather than to heal them.

He says, the source of conflict is deeply embedded in cultural and social forces. The source of the conflict is indeed deeply embedded.

[3 : 02] It is hatred itself. Yes, the real enemy facing humanity, facing society, facing individual persons, is hatred.

And the enemy of that enemy is love. And today's sermon text from Jonah chapter 3 verse 10 to chapter 4 verse 11, which was so beautifully read.

I would try to recruit you to read at our church, but I won't do that. This text is a deconstruction of hatred, that hatred lens.

It's an invitation to embrace God's love for our enemy. Let's look at it together. Let me pray first. Father, we thank you for your grace this evening. We thank you for your love and your mercy.

We pray that you would help us to experience that in our own lives and to be transformed by it today. Help us now as we turn to the scripture. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

[4 : 10] Oh Lord, our Redeemer. Amen. Here's the first thing I want you to see in this passage. It's this hatred of the enemy.

That enemy lens is ultimately a denial of the gospel. To nurture enmity is to deny the grace of God. To view the world through the enemy lens is to live in the old world that has already been done away in Christ.

If anyone has the right to hate an enemy, it is Jonah. And it's these Ninevites that he has a right to hate.

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria, a regional superpower, a brutal oppressor of the Israelite people. The prophet Nahum dubs Nineveh in his writing, that bloody city full of lies and corruption.

Jonah hates the Ninevites. And if you understand ancient Israel, it's not hard to see why. But the text shocks us by showing us that this hatred of Nineveh is something more than it seems.

[5 : 23] Look at chapter 4, verse 2. Jonah is not only hating Nineveh, but he's going to war with God.

He hurls God's very nature at him as an insult. It is one of the most theologically correct prayers in the whole Old Testament.

And it is uttered in fury. Oh, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? For I knew you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and relenting from disaster.

What is going on here? Jonah's professed faith in a God who wants to mercifully bless the nations has come up against another commitment in his life.

A commitment to hating the Ninevites for the threat they represent to him, real or imagined. And as these two commitments collide, it becomes clear which one wins out.

[6 : 30] And this is exposed as Jonah lashes out at God. You're so soft, God. Don't you know this grace and mercy rubbish doesn't work in the real world?

These godless Assyrians are going to destroy our country, Lord. We're trying to defend righteousness and you are either with us or you're against us.

But if you know this story, you're seeing now that Jonah's life is an exercise in missing the point. Jonah is himself a picture of the gospel, albeit in a very ironic form.

It's right in front of his face, but he can't see it. Think about it. In chapter 1, Jonah runs from God and he descends. He goes down to Joppa.

He goes down into the hull of a ship. He goes down, down, down into the sea, being tossed over, dying to save these newly converted sailors.

[7 : 33] He descends. Swallowed by a large fish, in chapter 2, he cries out to the Lord in his distress and is vomited up onto the land three days later.

Resurrected. Sent out afresh to Nineveh. In chapter 3, he preaches the most unimpressive, unenthusiastic sermon of all time.

Five words in Hebrew. But sure enough, 40 days after that resurrection from the belly of the fish comes Pentecost.

The people repent. God relents. All are at peace except Jonah. Here he sits deeply angry.

What we're seeing here is the chief example of a sinner saved by grace come to the knowledge of God even though he ran away.

[8 : 38] He had no excuse. Jonah rejoiced. But then he regressed. And so now God is gently, mercifully trying to open Jonah's eyes to what this grace means for his life and for his calling.

He's being so gracious to him. Now you might be thinking, Jonah obviously is sort of a bigot. He doesn't understand God's grace.

But we do. We see it in Jesus. Not so fast. This is the exact same progression from the truth of God's grace in our own lives to the experience that must occur as we live it out.

See, when the just, righteous God shows indescribable mercy to this wicked prophet Jonah, when God relents of his fierce anger toward Nineveh for their evil, and when he invites us into his family through the gospel, he does so only in light of the self-giving, of his own self-giving in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul says that the only way that God can be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus is through the cross. It's amazing grace. But what Jonah's having to learn and what we have to learn in our lives is this is not a static possession to be hoarded.

[10 : 07] God's grace is not a static possession to be hoarded. Christ dies for us, yes, but then we join him in death through baptism.

And our lives are to become an analogy of his self-giving love. And this means that just as in some sense, just as Christ died for the ungodly, so in some sense, we too must live out self-sacrificial love for those who would otherwise be our enemies.

Miroslav Volf calls this the social significance of the theme of divine self-giving. He says, as God does not abandon the godless to their evil, but gives himself for them in order to receive them into divine communion, so also should we, whoever our enemies and whoever we may be.

And Jonah is standing at this moment of immaturity. And God is showing him and he's showing us to fail, his failure to mature in the gospel as he hates others, as he sees the world through the enemy lens.

To see the world merely in terms of the good guys and the bad guys is to live in the old world that's been done away with in Christ. That's the first thing we see in this text.

[11 : 30] Here's the second thing. To hate an enemy is a suicidal tendency. To view the world through that lens will destroy us.

The fire of anger consumes. It destroys our lives. It destroys our effectiveness. It's right to look at this text in the macro level.

This is a text written to Israel. It's written to the church. That's who Jonah represents. But Jonah is also an individual and this addresses us in our individuality. Comes right down to the world where we live sometimes in hatred and anger.

In chapter 3, verse 9, the king of Nineveh prays this prayer and commands everyone to repent. He says, we'll see if God will turn from his fierce anger, his burning anger.

And God does turn. But then, when we look at chapter 4, verse 1, God's anger is not burning. He's repented.

[12 : 39] The people of Nineveh have repented. But Jonah is burned up with hatred. And it's destroying him. He says, in chapter 4, verse 3, Lord, please take my life from me.

It is better to live than to die. Burned up. Verse 8, it is better for me to die than to live. And again, in verse 9, I am angry enough to die.

Jonah's a warning to us that if our hatred is not transformed by the gospel, by the Lord's spirit, that it will destroy us. Just as a scorching, hot wind comes and destroys Jonah's plant that shades him, so too will it bring spiritual dryness to us.

Just as the worm of anger eats the roots of that plant, so will it destroy the roots of our joy. God asks Jonah a question twice.

Do you do well to be angry? Literally, is it good for you to be angry? And the answer is obviously no. But Jonah loves his anger and it's ruining him.

[14 : 03] Am I saying that Jonah's anger is really destroying his life? Is he really suicidal? I don't know. But I know it can destroy our lives in a couple of ways. On the most basic level, Jonah's anger and our anger may well be causing real harm to ourselves.

So whether I'm feeling that rage of wanting to fight an enemy or take them down or get the best or stewing in the powerless anger that comes with feeling victimized, these things cause real joy, real harm.

There is no joy in Jonah, no shalom. And the same will be true of us if we continually view the world through the lens of enemy.

enemy. The APA, the Psychological Association, did a survey last year, a big study, and found significantly increased levels of stress during the election.

That wouldn't affect us here, right? A follow-up survey this year found that this has remained true well into 2017.

[15 : 17] And it's not difficult to see why. Social scientists and researchers note that as our connectivity has increased through things like social media, the 24-hour news cycle, the chief emotion stoked through these things is by far anger.

Anger has become a virtue. If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. And the effects on people can be pronounced.

An increase in anxiety, depression, physical symptoms like increased blood pressure, headache. The enemy lens drains us from the joy of the gospel.

It also destroys our effectiveness for God's kingdom. Jonah is this picture of the temptation that faces the Christian. When Jonah is in this rage induced despair, he goes out and he builds a hut for himself outside the city.

It's a booth or in Hebrew a Sukkot. It's the kind of booth that the people of Israel built every year as they commemorated the Feast of Tabernacles. They're wandering in the wilderness, a day of celebration that God had delivered them.

[16 : 29] In effect, Jonah builds a little chapel, a safe, familiar shelter from that big, bad city. Jonah should be down there taking the Ninevites to the next step, seeing if they will not only turn in fear of God's punishment, but turn in faith to the living God.

But instead, he retreats into himself and he says, God, damn those pagans. He kicks back on his couch, he watches the evening news, stokes his outrage.

The world's going to hell in a handbasket after all, isn't it? Jonah would say. The fire of anger, it consumes his life.

He should be active in mission, but he's sitting down, stewing in his anger. Imagine if we took all the time that we spend brooding, in anger, viewing life through the enemy lens, and we put it into action for God's kingdom.

How much more joy and effectiveness would there be? How much more joy would we have if we weren't constantly bombarded by the latest outrageous story?

[17 : 56] to hate an enemy, to view the world through that lens, is ultimately a suicidal tendency. Here's the last thing I want to show you in this text.

Hatred of an enemy reveals a lack of spiritual imagination. To live in hatred is to be blind to what the gospel makes possible.

there's an important exercise in imagination going on in the enacted parable of Jonah and the plant. Jonah's sitting in his little booth, stewing in his rage, but because of the way these plants were, these booths were constructed, it wouldn't have really shaded him all that well.

They're using palm fronds as the ceiling. But then, miracle of miracles, a plant springs up overnight. Out of nowhere, a reminder of God's promise that the Messiah would shoot up like a root from the stem of Jesse.

Jonah seems to understand the significance of this plant because the text says for the first time in the whole story that Jonah is glad. He's exceedingly glad, it says in verse 6, but as soon as this plant comes up, it awakens hope, God takes it down, and he uses this as a way to take Jonah's anger and redirect it in an empathetic way with where it needs to be, which is on Nineveh.

[19 : 37] God says, in effect, that hope you're rejoicing in, salvation, that I have not forgotten you, that is not for you alone, Jonah, but also for your enemies.

God ends this book with a question, should I, should not I pity Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also much cattle?

I think that's supposed to be funny, but I'm not sure why. Jonah is led to imagine something bigger than himself and his own suffering, real though it may be, and the text is asking its readers to participate and exercise their imagination as they are called to bear the cross of Christ in mission with him.

The first readers of the book of Jonah were the people of Judah, the southern kingdom. They had been forcibly removed from their land.

The Davidic lineage, that plant, had seemingly been cut off forever, and they were sitting in exile to Assyria's successor, Babylon.

[21 : 03] And these readers would have been acutely aware of what had happened, between the time of Jonah's story, and they're sitting there reading it in Babylon. Because even though the Assyrians turned here, a century later, they were back at their old ways, and they came into the northern kingdom, the ten tribes of Israel, with fury, and they removed the people, scattered them to the wind, and Israel was no more.

And the first readers sitting in exile themselves, tempted to despair of all hope, are faced with the question of what if Jonah had loved that city and its people?

Would Israel have lasted? And as they ponder the question, their imaginations would have been provoked in new ways. They would have thought of what the prophet Jeremiah said as God took them into exile.

He said, seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Reading Jonah in light of their current situation, they would have been provoked to imagine the possibility that if they embraced the exile, if they embraced this cross, God would visit them with a resurrection that seemed impossible.

[22 : 40] They were led to imagine that perhaps God had not abandoned them, but that God was going to use their suffering at the hands of an enemy to bring the fulfillment of the promise to bless the nations that he made so long ago in Abraham, their two Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

How does this relate to the church? The Polish poet, Czesław Miłosz, writes, Imagination can fashion the world into a homeland as well as into a prison or a place of battle.

It is the invisibles that determine how you will view the world, whether as a homeland or as a prison. nobody lives in the objective world, only in a world filtered through the imagination.

And in a world that seems to increasingly thrive on hatred, that seems to form in us this enemy lens through which we view things, what we need as the people of God is for a new imagination, what we need is to pray our minds and our hearts into the gospel story of the God who loves his enemies and in loving them turns them into his friends.

Christian prayer is nothing less than entering into the imagination of reconciliation. salvation. And I think the best hope for us in our times is for a church alive with that imagination.

[24 : 37] If we're hating our enemy, if we're viewing the world through that lens, we do so from a lack of spiritual imagination. imagination. We are blind to the possibilities that the gospel gives us.

Well, here we are. Through Jonah, we get a kind of reductio ad absurdum of hatred of our enemies.

More positively, we're invited into a deeper understanding of grace in our own lives. And we are not invited to a renewal of spiritual imagination.

If this all seems too hopelessly big picture, I apologize. I want to leave you with a very tangible step that you can take, that you must take, if you are to be part of entering into this imagination.

You must pursue reconciliation with your brothers and sisters. I'm only 33, but I've been deeply involved in quite a few churches.

[25 : 45] I've worked at three of them, different countries, different denominations, different sizes, different worship styles, and what has been consistent at all of them, what held them back from getting to mission to the world, was that the enemy lens had affected them on the inside.

grudges were nursed, conflict was never dealt with in a healthy manner, gossip was spread. Jesus said, the world will know that you are my disciples by the love you have for one another.

And I've seen that look really good, and I've also seen it continually threaten God's people in the church and their mission. See, the real enemy we face is hatred, it's unforgiveness, it's living outside of the gospel, it's living in the old world.

And the church is to be a vanguard of self-giving love. If we can't love one another as God's people, our brothers and sisters, whether they're in this room or other brothers and sisters, how are we going to love our enemies?

The enemy of our enemy is love. It is the divine love of God's self-giving in Christ.

[27 : 14] In just a few moments, we're going to pray the Lord's prayer. We're going to say, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And we're going to partake with Jesus at the table, declaring that we partake of one loaf and one cup.

And as we prepare our hearts for this, Dan's going to come play a song. And I want you to reflect on whom you've made into an enemy and ask the Lord to show you how to seek genuine reconciliation in your life.

Let me pray. Father, we thank you for your grace. We thank you that though we, like Paul, are the chiefest of sinners, that you have loved us with an everlasting love, that though like Jonah who fled into the far country and that son who went and lived with the pigs, that even though we ran away, you ran after us.

Help us now to take that more deeply into our heart, to be transformed by it, and that it would work itself out in your church, in this place.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.