

A Whale of a Problem

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

November 5, 2017 ~ ~ Stewardship Season Fourth Sunday

All Saints Sunday

Text: Jonah 1:1-17

So, I'm curious. What does a really bad day look like for you? We've heard about what Alexander, a six-year old, considers a bad day – no toy in his cereal box, no dessert at lunch, plain white sneakers and the only one in the family to have a cavity at the dentist's. Been there, done that, right? And not just when we were six. We've also heard about Jonah's bad day – getting thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale. So, what's a bad day that you can think of which you recently endured? Tell us, what made it a bad day? Interactions with other people? Difficult situations? What made it a bad day? (pause for responses)

Okay, here's my next question. How did that bad day end? What happened next? How did you move beyond the bad day? (pause for responses) Alexander thought moving to Australia would be the answer to all his problems. If we're honest we need to admit we've all had those moments when we'd just like to run as far and as fast as we can away from whatever problems are giving us such a rotten day. That is a very normal response, a very human one. Let's remember that Jesus routinely took time apart from the constant barrage of problems coming his way. Jesus made it a practice of withdrawing from people to a quiet place to

rest and pray, most likely just to be. This is a good thing for all of us to do, but it's not always so easy to make happen. Calendars are full and days are busy. In short, life happens dragging us along with it most of the time. Bad days and good days run together, as life speeds along. Perhaps it would be helpful, then, to examine a little more closely what makes a bad day, bad.

We've talked a little about the days we've had and what makes us describe them as bad. We've heard Alexander's bad day described and I think most of us have had those Alexander kind of bad days. These are the days when it feels like you can't do anything right no matter how hard you try. I had a yoga teacher once who would say on those days her karma was out of alignment. I've had a Reiki practitioner say that a bad day means your energy fields are out of balance. I've had a doctor tell me a string of bad days was because I wasn't eating the right foods or getting enough rest. One told me to take vitamins and another told me not to take any vitamins. Is any of this sounding familiar? Guess what? Suggestions of how to fix them notwithstanding, I still have bad days. That's because bad days are not a problem, a deficiency in us, to be solved. Bad days are just that – bad days. They happen, often for no real reason we can point to other than stuff happens.

Not so with our friend Jonah. Jonah's terrible, horrible, no good very bad day which ended with him in the belly of a whale

was his fault. He caused it, no doubt about that. Jonah's day ended with him sitting in the smelly belly of a whale hoping not to be digested because he decided he could outrun God and God's plans for him. Jonah decided he knew better than God and he acted accordingly. When God asked him to do something he didn't want to do, Jonah ran. Not to Australia like Alexander dreamed of doing, but to Tarshish, a city across the Mediterranean from the port city of Joppa. I've always wondered why Jonah thought getting on a ship would keep God from finding him but, then again, at that point in Judaism, there was still some sense of God being anchored to a physical location than we are accustomed to thinking. Whatever the reason, Jonah thought he could escape God's plans for him by jumping on a ship. As we know from the story, that did not work out well for Jonah.

Several things to note about Jonah's bad day. First is that Jonah just didn't want to do what God asked him – to go to Ninevah and proclaim to the people that God was upset with them. But why? Why didn't he want to go? Was he afraid of the people who lived in Ninevah? They were, after all, an enemy of the Hebrew people. It might make sense for him to be afraid. But, no, as it turns out in the end of the story which we didn't read, Jonah tells God why he didn't want to go. It was because if the Ninevites repented of their sins, Jonah knew God would forgive them and he didn't think they deserved to be forgiven. If God was

telling him to go and tell the Ninevites God was going to destroy them no matter what, that he would have done. But give them the chance to escape God's wrath? Nope. He wasn't interested in anything that would help or save the Ninevites. Sort-a makes you wonder why God would pick him for the task, doesn't it?

Another thing to note about Jonah's bad day is that, after the ship he was on started experiencing bad weather, the captain and their crew immediately started praying to their gods. When they realized Jonah was sleeping instead of praying they started to get suspicious. Jonah didn't respond when they first asked him why he was sleeping. So, they left him alone but decided to try to figure out who or what the problem was by casting lots. Not our usual go-to for problem solving, but it worked for them as the lot fell to Jonah. Only then did he tell them his real story. That's when something really remarkable happens. Even after he tells them it's his fault and that his God is the one causing the problems, a fact which terrified them, even then, they didn't toss him overboard. He told them to, and they still didn't. Then the storm got even worse and they realized they would have to toss him overboard but they prayed for forgiveness first. Then they tossed him overboard and the sea immediately calmed down. And Jonah ended up inside a passing whale, totally his fault.

I realize this may sound harsh but, Jonah totally brought this upon himself. He tried to outrun God, putting other innocent

lives in danger in the process. He did not pray for help or deliverance or forgiveness even when everyone figured out what was going on and that he was the cause of the situation. The crew of the ship prayed, but not Jonah. The crew, by the way, was not Hebrew. They were probably Phoenicians who believed in a whole pantheon of gods, none of whom were the Hebrew God. But they knew about the Hebrew God and they couldn't believe Jonah would be stupid enough to think he could hide from God. These pagan sailors had more faith, more respect in Jonah's God than he did. This begs the question of why God picked Jonah for this task in the first place. He clearly was not as devout as he thought he was if he thought he knew better than God. But then again, perhaps we are all more like Jonah than we want to admit.

For example, how good are we at forgiving people we think don't deserve forgiveness? That's a tough thing to do, isn't it. I can't forgive that person for what he did! He knew it would hurt me and he did it anyway. He deserves whatever happens to him! Yep, we've all had that thought one or two times. And, how good are we at doing something we know God would like us to do, but we just don't feel like doing. You know what I mean – that nagging sense of something you should do, like volunteering to be on a board here at church or increasing your pledge into the pinch zone or even taking on a new role at the bazaar. Like making the extra effort to welcome a new neighbor or visit an old friend who's

having a tough time, but somehow we just never get around to it even though we keep thinking about doing it. We all have those nagging thoughts and sometimes our reasons for not doing something nagging us are indeed very valid. But, if we're honest we have to admit we're also really, really skilled at telling ourselves all the reasons why we shouldn't do whatever. We even go overboard and convince ourselves we *can't* do whatever it is. Invite someone to come to church with me? I can't do that! See if my new neighbor needs any help with something? They'll think I'm being pushy! And so on, and so on. Jonah, Jonah, Jonah – we know ya far too well.

This is especially true, I think, when what God is asking us to do is what God asked Jonah to do – confront someone who is doing something we know to be hateful or mean or just plain wrong. Let me explain. If you're having a conversation with an acquaintance who casually uses the “N” word, do you stop and say, “you know, I really don't like that word.” Or, do you just grit your teeth and find an excuse to walk away. Or how about speaking up in a group you know to be more conservative leaning in and saying, “I'm so proud of my church for standing up for LGBTQ folks. God loves them too, just as much as you and me.” Or do you sort of avoid the whole topic? And here's one right out of the headlines. If a female friend or co-worker comes to you, shaking and upset, telling you someone you both know has said

something to her she finds very uncomfortable, even a little scary, what would you say to her? Would you believe her? Would you invite her to come and talk with you more about it, offer to help her figure out what to do? Or, would you just smile at her and change the subject?

All of these situations, dear friends, are Ninevah moments. All of these are moments when God has put an opportunity to live and speak your faith in God, trusting that God will be with you through the entire situation you are confronting. Friends, we all encounter these moments, much more than we want to admit. When we see someone berating a cashier for an unfair reason, do we look away or offer a word of kindness to the clerk loud enough for the person to hear? When you know someone is being harassed at work or at school, do you pretend you don't see or do you offer a sympathetic ear and a shoulder to cry on? These are the kinds of terrible, horrible, no good, very bad days that we witness some people experiencing and then the onus falls to us to speak God's truth, God's love into that moment. Or, we can always pull a Jonah and just run away. We can pull a Jonah and tell ourselves that those people will be okay without our help. We can pull a Jonah and tell God we know better what we should do than God ever could.

Yikes! We may all feel like Alexander some days hoping we can just head for Australia but we don't. And I'm pretty sure none

of us want to end up like Jonah, telling God what to do and who's important and who isn't. None of us want to be responsible for someone else's bad day. But, how wonderful would it be, could it be, to be the reason for someone else's good day? How amazing would it be to have someone say to us, "I'm so grateful to you for standing up for me when that person was so mean." Or, "I'm so glad you told me about your church. I don't know how often I'll come but I'm glad to know it's here." Or, best of all, "I'm having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day! Do you have any idea of something I can do to feel better?" "Sure," you answer with a warm smile. "Come chat a spell. Tell me all about it. Let's talk." Give it a try! Who knows, maybe you'll be one of those saints of the church people celebrate and remember on All Saints Sunday. How cool would that be??? Amen.