

Speaking the truth in love

Jonah 3:1-10

January 22, 2012

It's really very simple. Jonah went to Nineveh and proclaimed the Lord's message. The people of Nineveh believed the message and repented of their sins and changed their ways and God changed his mind. God did not punish them as he said he would.

It's really very simple. Jonah spoke the truth. The people of Nineveh listened and their lives were spared.

It's really very simple. When you speak the truth, you may save someone's life.

It's really very simple.

Then why does it get so complicated? Why is it that so many times in so many situations, we don't want to speak the truth? It gets complicated, because we are complicated. We are filled with mixed motives and conflicting emotions. We have divided minds. We have divided hearts. We don't want it to be that simple. Jonah didn't want it to be that simple, so he ran away.

The Lord told Jonah to go and speak the truth to the people of Nineveh, and he immediately set out ... in the opposite direction! Nineveh was north and east, over the mountains and through the desert, but Jonah boarded a ship sailing for Spain, due west over the Mediterranean Sea! The Lord told Jonah to go and speak the truth to the people of Nineveh and Jonah ran.

Why? Why did Jonah run? Well, how ready would you be to go to the capital city of your most feared enemy and denounce them for their wickedness! So Jonah was scared? Probably, but it was more than that, too.

You know the story: the terrible storm at sea, the terrified sailors, Jonah thrown into the sea at his request, then swallowed by a great fish, only to be spit out on the beach three days later. That got Jonah's attention, and when the Lord asked again, he went. Jonah went to Nineveh. Jonah spoke the truth, the people of Nineveh listened, and their lives were spared.

It was that simple, and Jonah was ripped! Jonah was ripped, bitterly angry, because God did just what he knew God would do. Jonah knew God would change his mind. Jonah knew God would be merciful. God spared the lives of the mortal enemies of Jonah's people, but Jonah wanted them to get what was coming to them.

Jonah was angry because they were spared, and he was angry because he was humiliated. There he stood in the heart of mighty Nineveh, proclaiming that in forty days it would be destroyed, and it didn't happen! God made him look like a fool.

God changed his mind. God showed mercy. God showed mercy because God felt pity for Nineveh. God showed mercy because the people of Nineveh were his creation, too. God didn't care about saving Jonah's reputation. God cared about saving people's lives!

That's what Jonah lacked. That's what made this so complicated for him. Jonah lacked pity. Jonah lacked love. The compelling motive for speaking the truth is love. That's what God expected of Jonah and that's what God expects of us: to speak the truth in love.

Speaking the truth in love ... It's a biblical expression. It comes from one of the letters of Paul, from Ephesians 4:15 -- "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." It was one of my father's favorite expressions.

Speaking the truth in love. Truth and love belong together. Truth without love is cold and hard, even hurtful, truth wielded as a weapon. But love without truth is soft and weak and ultimately useless because it doesn't help anything.

Actually, that's not quite right, because you can't really have truth without love or love without truth. Truth without love is not truth, and love without truth is not love. It is the loving thing to speak the truth. Speaking the truth is an act of love.

Withholding the truth, not speaking the truth, whether out of fear or out of a desire to protect someone from hurt, is called "enabling." Enabling allows the disease, the destructive behavior, the evil, to continue unchecked, unchallenged. Is that love? Is it love to let a person go on destroying themselves or destroying the people around them?

Jonah did not love the people of Nineveh like God did. He was willing to stand by and say nothing and let them go to their own ruin. And they would have been ruined, because they were wicked! The Assyrian empire was violent and cruel and imperialistic. The people of Nineveh needed to change because their ways were the ways of death, death for the people around them and death for themselves. God wanted to wake them up, to shake them up, to provoke them to change their ways, to spare his beloved Israel who suffered much because of Nineveh, but also to spare his beloved Nineveh. Because God loved the people of Nineveh, God wanted them to hear the truth.

Speaking the truth in love. That's what God expected of Jonah and that's what God expects of us. God expects us to speak the truth to those we love.

Maybe there is someone you love stuck in an unhealthy way of life or a hurtful way of life or a self-destructive way of life or a sinful way of life.

Maybe they have a problem with alcohol or gambling. Maybe they go from one bad relationship to another looking for something they aren't going to find in any lover. Maybe they are miserable in their job but are unwilling to admit it.

Maybe they aren't treating their diabetes or some other physical or emotional illness. Maybe they don't see or don't acknowledge the hurtful effects of their own selfishness and intimidation.

Maybe they are run ragged because they haven't learned how to say "no." Maybe they are not doing the good they could or should be doing because they haven't learned how to say "yes."

Is it love to stand by and watch and say nothing? Is it love to make excuses or to downplay the harm? Is it love to turn your back or to give up or to shut up because you've already tried?

Love never gives up! Love never stops telling the truth. Love never stops telling the truth to those who are loved, not to scold or to punish or to shame, but to heal. When you speak the truth in love, you may save someone's life.

God expects us to speak the truth to those we love, and God expects us to speak the truth in love to our enemies.

How do you love your enemies? By ignoring them? By staying out of their way? By letting them do whatever it is they want to do, without any resistance or challenge from you? Is that love, to leave them alone? To refrain from criticizing or arguing or judging or fighting?

No, that's not love. You love your enemies by speaking the truth to them, speaking the truth that can change their lives, speaking the truth that can change your relationship.

You speak the truth to those who threaten you. You speak the truth to those who intimidate you. You speak the truth to those who disagree with you. You speak the truth to those who are just plain disagreeable. You speak the truth to those on the other end of the political spectrum from you. You speak the truth to those on the other end of the religious spectrum from you.

That's a hard thing to do. Jonah didn't want to do it. It takes courage. It requires sacrifice. It involves risk. But, above all, it requires love, love like God's love that feels pity even for the cruel people of Nineveh because he made them, love that understands that what we have in common with every human being, with every creature of God, is far greater and far more important than anything that divides us.

So you speak the truth to your enemies, not to denounce them, not to score points, not to win a debate, not to put them in their place, not to embarrass them, not to prove yourself to them, but out of love for them. And when you speak the truth in love, even to your enemy, you may save someone's life.

It's really very simple. Love makes it simple. When you speak the truth, you may save someone's life.