

Sermon – 3rd Epiphany
Jonah 3:1-5, 10
January 21, 2018

“A Visit to a Tough Neighborhood”

Anyone who lives in a major metropolitan area like we do knows there are parts of town that you might want to avoid. In the late 1980's Marcella and I made our first trip to Chicago and even during the day we were reluctant to venture off Michigan Avenue. I guess we were afraid we'd see something we didn't want to see or hit upon some unsavory part of town and get mugged or something. Chicago had a reputation as a dangerous city and we took that reputation to heart.

A good part of the reason Jonah sailed for Tarshish to the West instead of obeying God and going to Ninevah in the East was the reputation of that great city of Ninevah. Yes, Jonah had some prejudice in him – he represents the nation of Israel that had gotten a bit haughty toward others. He didn't care to see the grace of God extended to Ninevites. He may have concluded the people there were beyond hope, and not worth the effort. And he may, as an observant Jew decided he didn't want to go there because he might see or hear something he didn't that offended. Jonah wasn't interested in a visit to a tough neighborhood.

I've chosen Jonah today because for many Christians there's place we're reluctant to go. This place is the neighborhood called Abortion. Since January 1973 it has been legal to end a pregnancy through abortion in America. Since 1973 it has remained one of our nation's most divisive social issues. Since 1973 60,000,000 pregnancies have ended that way. We've just gone through a national election in which once again a subtext was the very Supreme Court who in 1973 found a constitutional right to abortion in the case of Roe v. Wade. Unborn children in our nation have no choice, and therefore little justice.

Moreover, there is the aftershock of abortion, woman who right after, or maybe 5, 10, even 20 years removed from the abortion they received speak with a heaviness of heart about it that belies the notion that abortion is simply “*a medical procedure*”. Yet lest we conclude, unfairly, that abortion is a “women's issue” alone, recent research by Dr. Wanda Franz, former chair of the department of psychology at West Virginia University says that among woman who have had an abortion, their age and even their financial condition were secondary to the role of the father of the child in the decision to abort. Women who had reason to doubt the father's willingness to support her and their child was a far stronger reason for their decision. Some women are not so much “*pro-choice*” then, as they are “*see no other choice.*” No, this tough neighborhood called abortion requires a soul searching about the very nature of families in our country, and is as much a man's issue as it is a woman's.

Jonah went to Ninevah need some real convincing about God's character and will for the human race. Ninevah was a large city, “*a three day journey across*”, but our story tells us that Jonah “*only went a day's journey before turning back*”. Then he retreated to a safe distance outside the city walls. Perhaps he wished God would just make the place and its inhabitants go away. Many Christians if they go at all, only wish to go a day's journey into the issue of abortion and no further. It's a tough town to enter.

There is the neighborhood of laws and policies that support or even promote the practice. There is the neighborhood where we see the often-desperate conditions that make a woman choose such an option – that neighborhood is called “*systemic poverty*”, and in such places there are lots of people who prey on that poverty – like the women’s clinic in South Texas who in September, right after Hurricane Harvey, placed ads offering free abortions to women who lost homes to the storm – adding an individual tragedy to a collective one. There is the neighborhood where we must hear the shocking details of how abortions are performed – and how evidently some have figured out how to profit off of fetal tissue.

But the church, if it is the church that Jesus sent out “*to be fishers of men*”, is a church that must travel the length and breadth of this city called “Abortion” and visit all its neighborhoods. That will take prayer before we can enter, see and hear things we don’t want to. Not just a day’s journey in, but the whole way. There we will meet people who believe that an abortion not only may be but is a responsible, healthy choice. There we will meet people who believe that fetal tissue is too valuable to medical research to be ignored, regardless of how that tissue and its stem cells are “harvested”.

There we will meet people who believe this is none of the church’s business, who defend the sanctity of human choice above the sanctity of life. But even if we go that far, we’d still have farther to go. We have to stop in the neighborhood of those who think violence can stem the tide of abortions, where we’ll have to contend with “*eye for an eye*” thinking Jesus was no supporter of. Then to the neighborhood where woman gripped with fear about a pregnancy or regret about a past abortion are living, to offer ears that hear and hearts that do not condemn.

And then we must finish the journey, and go into the darkest avenues of this city called Abortion, where men, often addicted to pornography but these days some sort of “*male prerogative*” treat sex as a sport and women as sexual playthings. Into the precincts of a sex obsessed culture that markets irresponsibility, which coats the precious union of a man and a woman in slick images of momentary pleasure without a hint of commitment or consequence – where both men and women reside.

Abortion is a big city, three days journey across, at least. But we need to travel it. Some residents of this city are hearing...if slowly. What they will listen too however is our love. Yes, fewer women are choosing an abortion in this country. Far too many still do. It’s been 45 years since abortion became legal in our country, seems forever, but maybe we’ve only gone a day’s journey. But go we must, to legislative conference rooms or gatherings of organizations like Lutherans for Life that seek to educate us from a faith perspective. But also into to our own rooms where we look in our own mirrors, and the rooms our sons and daughters to talk with them about the God of life whose every impulse in directed toward life – who see them and the children they may have with such delight. *Go, and I will make you gatherers of men and women*, Jesus said. With that promise, there is no neighborhood we need fear entering, because we never enter it alone. AMEN