

SERMON FOR LENT FIVE

TEXT: JONAH 3: 1-4:4, 11

THEME: LOVE SO BROAD

In the name of Jesus:

During this time of Covid, we have all heard about having our own bubble. A bubble is a social network consisting of people who we are close to, most likely, close family members. Another type of social network that people refer to is a circle, a group of people who you associate with, either at work or recreationally.

Sadly, though, we have a tendency to draw a circle around the people who we think are “the right kind” of people, our kind of people—people who are worth caring about, worrying about, speaking well about, treating with value and dignity. And perhaps for you that is a very big circle, and there aren’t too many people who fall outside of it. And yet, for each one of us, there is a temptation, at some point, to draw that line, whether we realize it or not, and to regard those who are on the other side of that line as bad, offensive, despicable, evil, nasty, unworthy of our love and pity and care. Even a great prophet of the Old Testament acted in this way—famously. In the book of Jonah, we read about God’s call to the prophet to go and preach repentance to the ultimate enemy of his people: to the ruthless Assyrians and their ruthless

king, right in their capital city of Nineveh. You probably know the story. Instead of obeying and going to Nineveh, Jonah headed straight in the opposite direction, and hitched a ride on a ship heading west. God sends a storm on the sea. God rescues Jonah from drowning by preserving him in the belly of a fish. Jonah prays to God, and the fish vomits Jonah back out onto the dry ground. Jonah then goes to Nineveh a second time, preaching the message of repentance. The people repent, and Jonah as a result pouts like a spoiled child. The Assyrians weren't Jonah's type of people and they weren't worthy of God's love. And that is where our text comes in. Jonah tells the Lord: "Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry? . . . And 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?"

Now to be sure, the Assyrians were the worst type of people. They were the scourge of the world in Jonah's day. They were known for brutally subjugating other people groups, torturing those who dared oppose them. Assyrian troops would skin people alive and impaling people alive on sharp poles. Some years after Jonah, it would be the Assyrians who would annihilate the northern kingdom of Israel, ten of the twelve tribes of God's people, and erase them from history. About the same time, the Assyrians would invade the

southern kingdom of Judah, and while God would rescue Jerusalem at that time, historians estimate that as much as 50 percent of the population of Judah was either killed or carried off, force-marched to a life of slavery in various places in the Assyrian Empire. If Jonah was going to draw a circle, with certain people outside of that circle who did not deserve love or mercy, it makes sense that he had the Assyrians outside the line.

But God did not. The pity of God, the mercy of God, the love of God drew no lines, and extended all the way to their capital city, all the way to the king on his throne. Because of their great sin, God declared that his judgment was at hand, and that Nineveh would be overturned! But because of God's great mercy, he sent them a prophet, led them to repentance, took pity on them, and spared them. And that made Jonah mad.

The sainted Kirk Reed several years ago loaned me a book to read, a book about Pastor Henry Gerecke. The book was called "Mission at Nuremberg". It is a book about Pastor Gerecke and God's mercy and love which extends even to the worst of sinners. Pastor Gerecke was a Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod pastor from Saint Louis who volunteered to serve as an army chaplain overseas during World War II. When the Allies won the victory, it looked as if Pastor Gerecke would soon return home to his wife and family. But because he was Lutheran, and because he spoke German, top brass

requested that he remain in Europe a bit longer for a special assignment. He was to travel to Nuremberg, Germany, and there he was to serve as the personal chaplain to the Nazi war criminals who were being put on trial by an international tribunal for the unspeakable things that they had done, including the carefully orchestrated murder of millions of Jews. These were men who were labeled as “monsters.” And they were. But Pastor Gerecke had a calling, a calling not only from Allied authorities, but from our God, whose mercy is so broad. By God’s grace, Chaplain Gerecke didn’t draw his circle so narrowly that it excluded these men. He spoke to them frankly about their sins, about their need for a Savior, about Jesus Christ, who had borne their sins—all of their sins, yes, even theirs. Some, like Hermann Goering, refused to believe that Jesus could help him, refused to believe that Jesus was anything more than a man. Goering had concealed cyanide in his cell and committed suicide, dying without hope, without God, without the divine mercy and forgiveness which God was so graciously extending to him through Pastor Gerecke. But several other prominent Nazis came to acknowledge their overwhelming sin. They confessed their evil to Gerecke and to God. He pronounced to them God’s forgiveness in Christ. He gave them Holy Communion, he ministered to them with God’s Word, and when condemned to die, Gerecke walked beside five of them on their way to be hanged. Some of them you will meet one day, in the

light and joy of Christ's kingdom, where forgiven sinners share in Christ's glory and love forever.

To be honest, many loved the book but some did not appreciate the message of forgiveness. All one needs to do is to go to Amazon and read the review comments, most are very positive, but two negative reviews stand out. The first one-star review reads: "Getting close to these monsters and giving them human qualities and emotions is very difficult . . . to swallow. I understand the Christian philosophy of forgiveness, but that should be left to God. Let them go to their deaths fearing they may burn in hell. They provided no comfort to those they burned." The other reviewer who gave it one-star was offended for the same reason, with the last line reading: " just asking forgiveness is not enough to save these Nazi monsters' souls."

But it is, all because of Jesus. Isn't that what John 3: 16 means? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" [Jn 3:16]. Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" [Jn 1:29]. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" [2 Cor 5:19]. "As [Adam's] one trespass led to condemnation for

all men, so [Jesus's] one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" [Rom 5:18]. "Christ died for all," St. Paul writes [2 Cor 5:15]. Christ. Died. For. All. And elsewhere Paul writes, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" [1 Tm 1:15].

You see, no one is excluded from God's mercy. No one is unforgiveable. No one is excluded from God's love. Even the Assyrians, even war criminals, and yes, even you and me. For God desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. And the truth of the matter is this: God saves sinners in Christ. God's love is for all.

Amen