

Who were these Ninevites? What was so bad about them? And why did Jonah hate them so?

Historically, Nineveh was a great city in the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In the 7th Century B.C. it was the capital of the kingdom of Assyria. And in 722 B.C., the great army of the Assyrians overthrew Israel and occupied Samaria for 100 years.

Be that as it may, this wonderful old parable from the Old Testament seems to offer Nineveh more as a metaphorical city, a population, if you will, that dwelled altogether outside the circle of God's chosen people. Certainly, that difference had nothing to do with their economy. Theirs was a vital economy. Their trade and industry were the envy of other nations and tribes around them. The difference had little if anything to do with their culture. Theirs was a thriving culture, bringing interest and travelers alike to the city. The difference had nothing to do with their political structure. Their king was an effective and respected ruler. Their system of communication was unrivaled. Order and commerce prevailed. As a result of these things, life in Nineveh was good. Yet, for all that, the introduction of this parable of the prophet Jonah characterizes the Ninevites as wicked! But whatever is meant by "wicked" is, unfortunately, left to our imagination.

But even that harsh characterization was not why Jonah did his level best to stay away from them. Oh sure, Jonah considered them bad, wicked people. He knew of their strength and power. He knew them as oppressors and enemies of Israel, as altogether representative of unclean gentiles. But the reason that, when he got orders from God to go to Nineveh, he went instead in exactly the opposite direction as fast and far as he could, was that he knew they would turn to God!

So in light of that, I suggest to you that what was different about the Ninevites was that they lacked the word of grace, the call of love. Their wickedness and badness had nothing to do with the way they were made; for they too were made in the image of God. What they needed, and all they needed was for that grace and love of God to fill them up, to turn them around, to enable them to live as children of God. And entirely against his own will, Jonah took that Word of Grace to the people of Nineveh.

And sure enough, exactly what Jonah feared took place. Has an entire city, as lead by their highest leaders, ever responded to the claims of God in the way the entire city of Nineveh did, from the king on down? Has an entire people ever so willingly put themselves into the hands of God? So Jonah's fears were indeed realized: by the grace of God, those wicked Ninevites fulfilled their existence as people of God, and Jonah then had to look upon, and live with those Ninevites as brothers and sisters. And Jonah did not like his new faith family.

I wonder if there is any lesson here for us Presbyterians in Shreveport-Bossier City to learn? What do you think?