

The Priority of Persons

sermon digest

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Jonah 4:9-11, Matthew 6:25-33

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Jonah ends with a question. Folks who expect their stories to be wrapped up in a package, appropriately closed, with a nice ribbon on top are bound to be disappointed with this story. The door is deliberately left open. The question directed to Jonah is a statement of value that continues to be relevant long after the age of Jonah has passed and gone. We are left to ponder the question of human worth with new issues and situations in all of the generations that follow.

The "Peanuts" character Lucy angelically declares, "I just loooove humanity." In the next frame she recovers her normal scowl as she snorts, "It's people I can't stand!" Truth is, all of us draw a line somewhere. Lucy just happens to be brutally honest. What are your moral priorities? Most of us set family above strangers, friends above enemies, the U.S. before other nations, and Christianity above other religions. Humanity is an abstraction. Lucy might even write an occasional check for some great humanitarian cause, but she never expects to see faces up close and personal. When humanity is broken down into persons with names and faces, everything changes. For Lucy, it is for the worse. In an impersonal world persons are just too, well, personal.

The impersonal world of things demands priority. Harvey Cox wrote an article for *The Atlantic Monthly* in March, 1999, "The Market as God." A friend advised Cox to become familiar with the discipline of global economics if he wanted to become familiar with the real world. This scholar theologian discovered in reading *The Wall Street Journal* as well as the business sections of the major news magazines a language that was quite familiar. Economics turns out to bear a striking resemblance to Genesis, Romans, and Augustine's *City of God*. Economics was really "econology," according to Cox, a religious view of the world reduced to monetary values. Cox determined that "The Market" is God, but he also discovered sacraments of investment that bestow salvific power to the lost, entrepreneurial saints, and an eschatology telling about the end of the world. He even found a reversal of the doctrine of transubstantiation in which the bread and the wine become the actual body and blood of Christ. We have come to a point where the human body can be transformed into a commodity with all of the parts subject to market values and sale to the highest bidder. Cox finally gets down to the basic question: "What is the value of a human life in the theology of The Market?" He notes that whether someone deserves to live or die in this religion is based largely on monetary issues and the fortune or misfortune of family financial condition, available insurance, or access to medical help.

Harvey Cox, known both for his sense of humor and profound insight into the secular city in which we live, was raising, tongue in cheek, a basic question of value. In picking our priorities in life, unfortunately we are stuck with a material measuring stick. I recall watching my mother planning her attack on the grocery stores every Thursday. She would have all of the local grocery ads laid out on the kitchen table carefully noting the relative prices available for her to exploit. When Dad arrived from work, they would set out to get the most for the least, with little concern for the price of fuel to get from one store to the other. Value was always measured in dollars and cents. In a world where The Market is god, the measure of value is not debatable.

Perhaps one of the most radical things suggested in the Sermon on the Mount is the wild notion that values are not material; they are personal. Jesus suggested that we love enemies, that our treasure is where our heart is, and that the kingdom of God ought to have priority in our lives. In the lesson on anxiety Jesus notes that God cares for the birds that neither sow nor reap, "Are you not of more value than they?" The meaning of life comes down to setting your priorities on the kingdom of God.

The world is personal. For a long time, missions was an abstraction for me. Even when the missionary came with native dress, slides, and artifacts from some quaint culture, I did not have to deal with real people. I have always been insulated by a layer of institutional bureaucracy and a line of missionaries. Don't misunderstand. It is not the fault of the missionaries or the bureaucracy. It is called "organization," the way to get things done.

Christ commissioned his disciples to go into the world, just as God called Jonah go to Ninevah. In both cases, it is not world of abstractions but real people in real need. The Christian faith has a global

dimension with a particular focus. Christ calls disciples to compassion for real people, however strange and distant. The world mission also opens our eyes to the real world beyond our borders. The setting of Jonah is limited to the tiny world known to the Hebrew people in the fourth century before Christ. The flight to Tarshish suggests the Mediterranean world, perhaps Spain, the farthest point west that anyone had ever been known to travel from Jerusalem. Ninevah takes Jonah to the extreme boundary of the eastern world. In the covenant with Abraham, God not only promised blessing to Father Abraham and his family, God promised to bless the world through him. Hardly anyone had paid attention to the global dimensions of the covenant. The world outside Israel was best hidden in abstractions. In light of the bad experience with major world powers, everyone knew that Israel's best strategy was isolation. But the world became a reality to Jonah in Ninevah, as the world became a reality to Israel in Babylon. Whether the method of delivery from abstraction to reality is a fish or an Assyrian army is unimportant.

After the Exile, the People of God could never again ignore the Gentile world. I recall listening to a Houston judge speaking at my sister's high school graduation during the Korean War. He cited George Washington as the expert on international relations as he observed the dangers of the United Nations and our involvement with foreigners. Unfortunately, world politics and world missions tend to get confused. International politics usually shapes attitudes toward missions. The correspondence between the age of colonial expansion and the great missionary movement of the nineteenth century was no accident.

Three questions frame the final chapter. Jonah is angry that God does not carry out the sentence of destruction on Nineveh, and God asks, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Then, there is the episode about the bush. A pouting prophet sits in the sun waiting for God to rain fire on the city he has been sent to save. The shade of a lean-to shelter constructed by Jonah is supplemented by a plant provided by God. The Lord of nature sends a worm to kill the plant and a hot windstorm to destroy the shade and remove all creature comforts from Jonah. Then, God asks again, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Finally, the story ends with an open ended question addressed not only to the reluctant prophet Jonah, but to all who came after him: "should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

The problem with Jonah is that he cares more for a shrub than he does for the people of Nineveh. Moral value for God is rooted in the value of persons. We decide everyday whether the life of a child in Haiti is worth a dollar's worth of our creature comforts. Wars always pit people against property, and in the history of nations, property always wins. We have had the opportunity to learn from Christ a different set of values. Waldo Beach notes the hierarchy of Christian values: "Things are to be used; persons are to be loved; God is to be worshiped."