

Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
Psalm 62:5-12

1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
Mark 1:14-20

The story of Jonah being swallowed by a big fish is probably one of the more well-known stories of the Bible. God called Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh to proclaim God's message calling for repentance, "to cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." God called Jonah to, or more accurately, to speak against the Ninevites. Jonah decided otherwise. He was not about to speak to the Ninevites. Jonah wanted to get "away from the presence of the Lord." He really wanted to get away from the Lord for he got on a ship headed in the opposite direction, to Tarshish, the farthest point to which one could travel by ship. A great storm threatened the ship, frightening the passengers and even the crew. Jonah admitted that he was running away from God. Knowing that God brought on the storm for his refusal to obey, Jonah asked to be thrown off the ship to save the passengers.

Well, God made an offer Jonah could not refuse. Jonah was swallowed by that fish. God gave him some time to ruminate about his decision, and so Jonah spent three days and three nights, ruminating in that fish's belly. I'm surprised the fish did not ruminate on Jonah those three days and nights.

Why was it Jonah did not want to go to Nineveh? Why was it that Jonah refused to speak to the Ninevites? It was because Jonah hated the Ninevites! Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and the Israelites and Assyria had long been enemies. There was plenty of reason to hate Nineveh. Assyria had oppressed Israel in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. It was tit for tat. It was an equivalent retaliation. Assyria had oppressed them, so Jonah was not about to save them. Jonah knew that if he did preach God's condemnation, and if the Ninevites did repent, God would extend God's

mercy even upon these hated Ninevites! Later, when Nineveh did repent, it angered Jonah that God forgave their oppressors, their enemy. It angered Jonah that God was “a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.” The theme of Jonah is that of the scandal of God’s mercy and grace that God extends to all. However, a subplot is Jonah’s bigotry, Jonah’s hatred, which prevented Jonah from accepting that God would be merciful to these oppressors.

Bigotry, racism, prejudice, hatred are aspects of our sinful, human nature and has reared its ugly head throughout human history and continues. In 1860, there were 3.9 million slaves in the United States. It was a life of oppression and violence. The thirteenth amendment, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery in our land. That did not end the oppression and violence. It was followed by Jim Crow laws, which enforced racial segregation. It was supposedly separate but equal, but we all know that it was not equal. It was not even close! It was a life of oppression and injustice: unemployment, poverty, lack of quality education, and suppression of voting rights. In the days of Jim Crow, nearly 3,500 Blacks were lynched, a practice of murder by extrajudicial action. And if an African American dared speak out, their lives were in danger. The non-violent protests of the Civil Rights movements were met with violence. That image of the troopers and police brutally beating and dogs viciously attacking the peaceful marchers trying to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 1965, is one that cannot be forgotten. Four young black girls were killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama when fifteen sticks of dynamite were planted in the church basement. This church was the rallying point for civil rights activities. Another

infamous crime was the “Mississippi Burning” slayings of three young civil rights workers who were ambushed and killed by Klansmen. People who spoke against the racism were literally killed.

We were all hoping that such ugly racism and hatred and its accompanying violence was disappearing. The other night, on the NET radio broadcast of Fresh Air, interviewed Melba Patillo Beals, one of the Little Rock 9, the nine African American youth who first integrated the formerly all-white Central High School in Little Rock. She was asked if any progress has been made. She responded:

I thought by this time, [fifty-six years later], I thought that equality would be here. But I was wrong. I was really wrong. But how is life different now? I have a voice. And so we have indeed, my dear, come a very, very long way. You may hit me now on the way out of the studio, but I have a voice. I can report that. ... That's cool. I see progress. It certainly is not happening at the speed I want it to happen.

However, the killings of black men by police officers the last few years, the violent protests in Charlottesville, Virginia, last August, betray the fact that racism is still flourishing. And it is not limited to African Americans. Matt Shepherd died six days after being beaten, tortured, and left to die near Laramie, Wyoming on October 12, 1998. Hate crimes against Muslims have risen.

Unfortunately, the church has been complicit in the racism in our nation. During slavery, there were Presbyterian leaders who believed the Bible supported slavery, but that was not a reflection of traditional Presbyterians. Many in the church believed the church needed to be silent about slavery. Churches supported Jim Crow laws. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa provided the national policies for apartheid. The church helped establish apartheid, and, in the early 1980's, still supported it. Franklin Graham called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States even before President

Trump adopted that position. There has been hate speech from churches against the LBGQTIA community and many church leaders denounce it as a sin.

Why am I repeating all of this history that most of us are aware of? The church cannot be silent. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." Society knows the church has been silent. They wonder where is the church. Justin Giboney, a conservative evangelical, wrote about the crisis the church faces when the church is silent on social justice in an article in *Christianity Today*, a conservative journal. He refer to the systemic silence of many churches. When the church is silent about racism, bigotry, and hatred, then the church participates in the oppressive status quo. In Nazi Germany, there were two distinct churches within Germany. There was the church that went silent about the evils of Nazism, and the church that spoke out against it, the Confessing Church. The Declaration of Barmen, one of the confessions of our church, was written by the Confessing Church as a statement against Nazism. The Bible is filled with stories where marginalized people break repressive silence and speak against it.

Jonah was silent when God asked him to proclaim to the Ninevites their sin. Jonah did not want God to be gracious, "This is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing." When we are silent, we are silent about the sins of racism, bigotry, and hatred. When we are silent, are we not being silent about God's grace, mercy, and love for all of God's people!

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us,  
and blesses us with peace,  
be all glory and honor forever. Amen.