

“Like Me” Jonah Series / 5: “Embracing the Other” / March 1, 2020

Key Texts: Jonah 1.1-9; Matt. 26.31-35; Acts 4.12; Phil. 3.5-7; Gal. 4.9

Key Words: Worship, Lord, Identity, Hebrew, Peter, Betrayal, Self-Worth

Summary: Jonah’s antipathy towards both the Ninevites and the sailors can be traced to an identity based on his race, rather than his God. What comes first in our lives is our “god.” Anything we put in that first place other than “God” will skew both our view of our selves, and others.

(Jonah 1.7-8) So ... let’s jump right into the middle of a story. Ready? Their boat is about to be torn apart or swamped by this incredible storm. And for some reason the sailors figure out the storm must have been sent by some “god.” Some “god” is mad at someone! So they cast lots trying to figure out who some “god” is mad at, and there is this guy Jonah, this “prophet of God.” And he is outed as the one. The storm is his fault. Some “god” must be mad at him, they figured. So they start firing at Jonah: “What did you do?! Who the heck are you.” And being sailors, I suspect it was a little stronger than “Who the heck are you.” They are like, “What do you do?! Where are you from?! What color are you?!” Which sounds kind of weird, at first.

And here’s what Jonah says. And what he says is ... half right. Actually the first half is all right; it’s the second half that’s only half right ... if that right. He says, “I am a Hebrew, I am a Jew. That’s what color I am.” And that part is all right. And then he says, “I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the land.” ... Well ... Liar! Maybe that’s too harsh. Maybe he’s just delusional. I guess Jonah does, kind of “worship the Creator, the one who made the sea and the land.” But it would be kind of a stretch, wouldn’t it, for Jonah to call him his “God,” or his “Lord”? At least in this scene.

I suppose a man can call God “God,” and then blow him off. We do that a lot. I suppose we can use the word “Lord” ... Jesus is our “Lord,” right? Our Savior and Lord. I suppose we can use those words without actually letting him be our “Lord.” ... And I think that’s what Jonah was doing, don’t you? He’s on this boat ... because he’s trying to avoid obeying his ... his “God,” ... his “Lord.” “You’re may be big, God, but you’re not my boss!” “I’ll go where you want me to go and do what you want me to do as long as it fits with where I want to go and do what I want to do,” right? And then this storm hits, and the boat is coming apart, and Jonah is sleeping ... letting them all go to hell, for all he cares. And when they ask him who he is, he says, “I am a Hebrew,” he says; and “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven.” Well, liar! He’s either lying to himself or he’s lying to them, right? Kind of like we do ... a lot.

Did you know that you can sincerely believe that there really is a God, and that Jesus really is the Son of God, and that Jesus really did die for your sins, and that God really did raise Jesus from the dead ... We can sincerely believe all that stuff, without ever letting him actually be our Lord and our God. I mean we know he is “God,” and all that, but I can know that without really letting him be my ... Lord, my “God,” the one I live for, the one who gives me meaning and purpose, the one I’d die for, the one who gets first place in everything.

Which explains why so many “Christians” are jerks, right? Why so many Jesus followers are racists; or greedy, self-absorbed materialists. Which explains why so many “Christians” are addicts ... “Addicted” to beauty, or to pleasure, or to whatever ... whatever else is not really “God.” You see, sometimes we believe that he exists, and we believe we probably need his help sometimes, and we know that someday we’ll need his help big time. We want him to be part of who we are; he’s just not the center of who we are. There are other things that are more important to us for now ... some person, maybe; someone’s approval maybe; money maybe; pleasure maybe. Everyone has some ... “god,” right?

Now ... let’s say someone just watches you, and you can’t filter what they see. And they don’t care much what you say, they just watch what you do. They watch what you wear, they watch who you hang with, they watch how you spend your money, they watch how you spend your free time, they watch what you do on the job, they watch how you treat people ... they see everything, unfiltered. What would they call your “God?” Would they see a disconnect between what you say, and how you live? ... like we see in Jonah? Well, that’s what we’re going to talk about today.

And if you are a little lost right now, let me catch you up. We’re in this study of one of the most controversial stories in all the Bible, the story of Jonah – you know, Jonah and the whale. And here’s where we are. The story opens like this: “One day the Lord spoke to Jonah son of Amittai. He said, “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware of how wicked its people are.” (And they were ... horrible!, so) Jonah, however, set out in the opposite direction in order to get away from the Lord. (Good luck with that!) He went to Joppa (a seaport on the coast of Israel), where he found a ship about to go to Spain. He paid his fare and went aboard with the crew to sail to Spain, where he would be away from the Lord. But ... the Lord sent a strong wind on the sea, and the storm was so violent that the ship was in danger of breaking up. (As you might guess) The sailors were terrified and cried out for help, each one to his own god. Then, in order to lessen the danger, they threw the cargo overboard. Meanwhile, Jonah had gone below and was lying in the ship's hold, sound asleep. (He was a world class jerk!) The captain found him there and said to him, “What are you doing asleep? Get up and pray to your god for help. Maybe he will feel sorry for us and spare our lives.” (Jonah 1.1-6)

And now we’re closing in on the scene we’re going to focus on this morning. Verse 7: “The sailors said to each other, ‘Let's draw lots and find out who is to blame for getting us into this danger.’ (They did that kind of stuff back then.) They did so, and Jonah's name was drawn.” And here it is, here’s where they start firing questions at Jonah. “So they asked him, ‘Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? (You? Your God?) What kind of work do you do? (Why’s your god so mad at you?) Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?’” (Jonah 1.8) Who is your God?!

Now, I’ve been telling you that we’re drawing a lot of the ideas for this series from Tim Keller’s great little book, “The Prodigal God.” We still have copies in our Connections Room if you want to follow along. Well, Keller says they are really asking Jonah 3 kinds of questions. #1: What’s your mission? What’s your purpose? What are you all about? #2: Where do you come from? Where do you live? Where’s your home? And #3: More specifically, Who are your people? What kind of people are you? What “Tribe” are you

from? But ... in reality they are asking a bigger question: "Who is your god, Jonah? Some "god" is really, really mad. Who is your god?"

Because here's the deal. Back then, back then they pretty much figured that if Jonah answered those other questions: What are you doing, what's your mission? And questions like, Where are you from, where is your home? And questions like, Who are your people, what tribe do you belong to? If he answered those questions, they'd know who his "god was." Because back then every place, every race, every profession had it's own "god," right? They understood something we miss sometimes: Who you are and what you worship are flip sides of the same coin. Who you are reveals what you worship; what you worship shapes who you are.

Now, the world was very different back then. Most everybody back then believed in boatloads of gods: Baal, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Dagon, Ra, Isis, Osiris, Marduk, Molech. Some of them would believe in whole pantheons of gods: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Artemis, Apollo, Ares, Athena, Aphrodite, Hermes. And most everyone back then believed that different gods attached to different places, and different gods attached to different kinds of people, different tribes.

But we're smarter than that now, right? We don't buy all that nonsense!

- We don't believe in a "god of commerce" named Mercury. But ... but I doubt anyone here would question that for some money is a god. No one here would doubt that there are those who would sacrifice their family, their friends, their integrity, their ... faith ... for money. We see it every day!
- We don't believe in a goddess of beauty called "Venus." But you've seen people who absolutely obsessed over how they look, or who judge others by how they look, right? You've seen people that shallow, who are way more obsessed with their bodies than their ... Creator.
- We don't believe in Bacchus, the god of wine, or Aphrodite, the goddess of love. But I doubt anyone here would push back if I were to say that there are many who value wine, or sex, more than they value their families, or their jobs, or their ... Jesus.

Everyone has someone they "say" they worship; and everyone has someone or something they "actually" worship, right? And here's the deal ... Listen, here's the deal: Whatever we put in "God's" place – the real God's place – is going to be a pale substitute. Either your little "g" god is going to fail you, or you're going to fail it.

- If money is your god, you'll never have enough.
- If beauty is your god, it's going to fade.
- If some person is your god, they are going to fail you, or you are going to fail them. And then, stupidly, you are going to get mad at the real God for messing with your fake god.

Here it is: everyone ... everyone ... worships some god. There is some thing, or some person you live for, more important than anything else. There is some thing, or some person who controls you, who you trust most. And they knew that. There is some thing, or some person who gives you significance, whose acceptance you would do nearly anything for.

And sometimes ... not always, but sometimes ... who we say we worship and who we actually worship are two different things.

Now, here's where I'm going to make some guesses about what Jonah says. I may be reading into the story a little, but I wonder. In fact, a lot of people wonder about how Jonah answers their questions. Does the order matter? Does the first thing he says matter most, whether consciously or unconsciously? It kind of looks like it might. The first thing Jonah says is this: "I'm a Jew." And then secondly he says, "I worship the one God, the creator God. He's my Lord, my God." (Jonah 1.9) And it would seem like what he puts first makes what he says next rather delusional. "I am a Hebrew," he says. "I am a Jew. That's who I am. And ... I worship the Lord God." It's kind of like me saying,

- "I'm an American ... and I'm a Christian." Because that's what most Americans are, right?
- Or, "I'm a 65 year-old white male ... and I'm a Christian." And a lot of people would immediately put me in a box, right?
- Or, "I'm a Republican," or "I'm a Democrat ... and oh ... I'm a Christian." Because a lot of folks treat political boundaries as way bigger than religious ones, right?
- Or, "I'm a husband, I'm a dad, I'm a papa ... and I'm a Christian."
- Or even "I'm a pastor ... and I'm a Christian." Because a whole lot of us pastors are way more comfortable working for God than being with God.
- Or, "I'm a businessman, or a crossfitter, or I'm retired, or I'm a lover, or whatever ... and a Christian." As if Christian comes second.

It looks like Jonah's race, his tribe, his people were more important to Jonah than his God. I'm serious! That's where the evidence points. Let me show you.

- The real God says, "Jonah, go to Nineveh, the enemy of Israel, a preach." And Jonah says, "I will not! We Jews hate those guys, and they hate us! They don't deserve your grace God, they deserve hell! Being a Jew is bigger to me than being your servant, God!"
- And then, Jonah is in this boat. And because his hatred of the Assyrians is bigger than his love for God, God sends this storm that not only threatens his life, it also threatens the lives of a bunch of innocents. Sailors God cares for! Jonah doesn't. They are the kind of guys he's supposed to nudge towards God. But being a Jew is more important to him than serving his "God."

So now we begin to understand this ... this ... cantankerous, belligerent prophet of God. And maybe ... maybe it helps us understand ourselves when we are cantankerous, and belligerent ... Jesus followers. Because we can be a whole lot like Jonah, right? ... Which is why we're calling this series, "Like Me." We're kind of like him, a lot. We can sincerely believe that there really is a God, and Jesus really is the Son of God, and Jesus really did die for our sins, and God really did raise Jesus from the dead ... We can sincerely believe all that stuff, and treat him as our Savior, but not our Lord. We can know he is "god" (with a little "g"), but it's tempting to do life without letting him actually be our "God" (with a big "G"). You know, the one we live for, the one we'd die for, the one we follow when we understand him, and when we don't; the one we follow when we agree with him, and when we don't; the one who gets first place in everything. Everybody has some god, right? Is yours Him?

Which explains why so many “Christians” are jerks, right? Why so many Jesus followers are racists; or greedy, self-absorbed materialists. Which explains why so many “Christians” are addicts ... whether to beauty, or to pleasure, or to whatever. You see, sometimes we believe that the real God exists, and we believe we probably do need his help sometimes, and we know that someday we’ll need his help big time. He’s a part of who we are; but we don’t permit him to be the center of who we are. But guys ... listen ... listen: God won’t accept second place. And we will never win ... ever ... putting him in second place.

Now, we’re almost there, but not quite. And this last part takes us a little beyond the Jonah story. Because we know a little more today about doing life with God today than Jonah did. Because of Jesus. So we’re going to skip over and talk about a guy who was a whole lot like Jonah ... a guy named Peter, who discovered something that will blow your mind.

You see, there was a time when Peter thought a whole lot of himself, like Jonah did. He was pretty full of himself ... as a Jesus follower. Jesus and his disciples are on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas was going to betray him. Jesus knew it was coming. So he says, “Tonight all of you – all of you – will desert me.” (Matthew 26.31) And Peter is like, “You are flat out wrong, Jesus! These twits might bail on you, but I never will! I am the bravest of them all! My devotion to you is unflappable!” (Matthew 26.33) And Jesus is like, “Bless your little heart!” Which, in the south, means, “You are so stupid!” “Bless your little heart, Peter, before this night is over you will betray me three times.” And instead of backing down, Peter just gets stupider. He’s like, “These twits might deny you, but I never will, ever, to the death!” (Matthew 26.34-35)

And you know what happens next. Or if you don’t, you can guess. ... So here it is: Let’s say your relationship with God is all about you? How much you love him, what you are willing to do for him ... the number of times you go to church each month, the number of verses you read each day, the number of times you pray, the amount of money you give, the efforts you make at cleaning up your act ... whatever. What happens you fail? What happens when you fail? Because you will.

Well, failure broke Peter! He couldn’t look into Jesus’ eyes anymore. He was embarrassed to be in his presence. He’s thinking to himself, “I just quit on God? Does that mean God is going to quit on me? He should!” Does my status as a Jesus follower rise or fall on my faithfulness, my devotion, my work, my character? We think so. Which is why, so often, our relationship with God is so tenuous, so fragile.

And then Jesus said something that still dazzles us. The women went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried, expecting to tend his body. When they got there, the huge stone that had sealed the entrance to the tomb was rolled aside. And inside, instead of the corpse of Jesus, there was an angel of God. And the angel said, ““Don’t be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” (Mark 16.6-7)

He could have said, “Go tell the disciples to meet me in Galilee,” and Peter would have gotten the message, right? But he says, “Go tell the disciples ... and make sure Peter

knows, I want him there too. I still love him. My cross covered those betrayals too.” And within weeks Peter is courageously preaching the Jesus he had betrayed. He says, “There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4.12) It’s not anchored in the purity and the passion of my love for him; it’s anchored in the purity and the passion of his love for me ... and you.

It’s kind of the way it works with about every other wannabe god. If you base your worth on what you achieve, then your self-worth is fragile.

- If you get your self-worth from the money you make, what happens when the market crashes, or some disaster strikes and you lose everything?
- If you base your self-worth on your career, what happens to you when your company downsizes, or you’re fired, or you just mess up?
- If you base your self-worth on your body, what happens when your body breaks, or when you get old?
- If you base your self-worth on the approval of your family, or your friends, or your heroes, what happens they are jerks and they push you away, or you’re a jerk and you push them away?

I’ll tell you what happens. You either live in a state of denial, or your failures shatter you. And it even works that way for us Jesus followers.

- If you think your life with God is based on your faithfulness, what happens when you are unfaithful? We call that sin. And we’re all really good at that.
- If you think your life with God is based on your passion for him, what happens when that passion fades for a time? Because it usually will. Our passions are fickle.
- If you think your life with God will be measured by how much you have served, or how much you have given, or how much you have endured as a Jesus follower, what happens when you can’t serve the way you used to, or you can’t give as much as you used to, or you face questions you can’t answer, problems you can’t solve?

Chances are we will either live in a state of denial, or our failures will shatter us. But they shouldn’t! Because – listen! -- our identity as Jesus followers, our worth as Jesus followers is not something we achieve, it’s something we receive. Let me say that again: Our identity as Jesus followers, our worth as Jesus followers is not something we achieve, it’s something we receive. My identity is not rooted in my devotion to Jesus; my fundamental identity is rooted in God’s love for me. And so is yours. So is yours. And if you can get that

It’s been weeks since I have quoted C. S. Lewis, so let me throw one at you. In the Chronicles of Narnia one character is asked, “Do you know Aslan?” He answers, “Well, he knows me.” Guys, that’s infinitely stronger. The apostle Paul put it like this. Remember, this Paul was full of himself once. Once, in his mind, he was a perfect God follower, he was the crème de la crème, the best of the best. (Philippians 3.5-6) And here’s what he says. He says, “I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.” (Philippians 3.7) It’s about what Christ has done; not what I do, what Christ has done. It’s about what he’s done for me, not what I’ve done for him. So he says to the Galatian Jesus followers, “So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you) ...” Because that’s way bigger, infinitely bigger.

Listen, the foundation of our life with God is not that we love God – because our love will always be fickle, imperfect, fragile. The foundation of our life with God is his love for us – which is undeserved, completely unearned, and absolutely perfect.

So guys, I am not a 65 year-old American; a white, male, libertarian; a husband, a dad, a papa, a pastor, who happens to be a Jesus follower. I am a person who has been graced by God, who happens to be a 65 year-old American; a white, male, libertarian, a dad, a papa, and a pastor.

Do you know what that means? It means that my failures don't change who I am. Even at my worst, I am still a man who has been graced by God ... a lot. I am still a man who will try to pick myself up and follow the one who always loves me perfectly. It means that even though I know I am an underachiever as a Jesus follower, he's never going to quit on me. Do you know how cool that is ... if you can actually believe that here (heart) as well as here (head)?

Do you know what else that means? It means that I don't have to look at the people God brings into my life as Americans or not; white or not; libertarians or not. It means I don't have to look at the people God brings into my life as "successful," or not; "beautiful," or not; good, or not. I actually can see people as unconditionally loved by God, infinitely valuable to my God. People he wants to do life with so badly that he sent his Son to die for them ... all of them. So ... the church really can be a place where there is no Jew nor Greek, no male nor female, where we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Will you allow your life to be defined by the real God? Will you give him the place he deserves? Won't it be worth it?