

Jonah: *Othering*  
Jonah 1:7-10

This morning we will return to our series in the book of Jonah. If you recall, Jonah is on the run from God. He has no intention of obeying God's call upon his life to confront Israel's enemy, that great city of Nineveh, with the news about God's imminent justice and His offer of mercy. Instead, Jonah has boarded a ship bound for the exotic land of Tarshish. He has convinced himself that disobedience is preferable to compromising his nationalistic priorities. Predictably, God has pursued Jonah by sending a horrible storm upon the sea. When we last visited Jonah, the sailors were casting lots to determine who was responsible for the unnatural storm that now threatens to destroy them all. Let's return now to Jonah 1:7-10 as we look a bit deeper into this part of the story.

<sup>7</sup> And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. <sup>8</sup> Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" <sup>9</sup> And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." <sup>10</sup> Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them.

In my last message on the book of Jonah, we briefly noted that Jonah's identity is primarily informed by what he reveals in the first words that he speaks in the entire narrative: "I am a Hebrew..." Even before Jonah identifies the God that he worships, he points to his race...his people...as the most significant thing about him.

In his commentary on Jonah, Timothy Keller parks here for a bit to unpack our human tendency to anchor our identity in something other than God and His unconditional love towards us. The consequences of rooting our identity in anything other than God are predictable and often devastating; so, at the risk of moving at a snail's pace through this very short book of the Bible, I would like to spend some time this morning further examining the subject of our identity under three subheadings: 1) Image Bearers; 2) Blindness and Hostility; and 3) Othering.

### **I. Image Bearers**

If you recall, upon casting lots and discovering that Jonah was the cause of the storm, the heathen sailors ask a series of questions. In vs. 8 we read: Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" The sailors are asking identity questions, because who we are is directly related to "whose we are." Our identity reveals our gods.

I'm sure you've noticed that human beings regularly define their identity based upon their achievements, their heritage, their people, their sexuality, and even their virtues. Think of the "I am" statements that you use or that you hear used by your friends and families. For example: "I am a conservative." "I am a Republican." "I am gay." "I am they." "I am an atheist." "I am Presbyterian." "I am a Jayhawk." "I am a perfectionist." "I am tough." "I am sensitive." "I am

tenured.” “I am an athlete.” “I am an intellectual.” “I am a fisherman.” “I am a lawyer.” “I am unemployed.” “I am a mother.” “I am a pastor.”

There is literally no end to the “I am...” statements that we use to communicate our identity. By the way, there is nothing morally wrong with articulating our identity with “I am” statements. Jesus did it all the time. That said, somewhere in the midst of our “I am” statements we are revealing our virtual god...our functional deities.

For some of us, our virtual god...that thing that holds the greatest claim about our identity...is our job. My particular job is one of those careers that can quickly define me and serve as the primary source of my identity. “I am...a pastor.” In fact, I am referred to in almost every setting as “Pastor Jim.” I’m sure there are some small children in our congregation who think that my first name is “Pastor” and my last name is “Jim”! My job has become my name, and my name is my job...do you see how vocation can quickly become identity? The same is true if you are a doctor, a judge, a lawyer, a teacher, a principal, a mayor, a president, a vice-president, a policeman, a fireman...these are all titles that define you and set you apart from the rest of the world. Our jobs can very quickly become our virtual gods because our jobs are not simply what we do...our jobs can become the ultimate means of defining who we are.

For others of us, we primarily define ourselves by our deepest commitments and responsibilities. “I am a mother.” “I am a husband.” “I am a leader.” “I am a good friend.” “I am a patriot.” “I am a soldier.”

Others define themselves by a particular virtue: “I am honest.” “I am loyal.” “I am hard-working.”

If you are from an Eastern descent, you might define yourself by clan, family, or caste.

Sex is now a primary identity marker in American culture. People define themselves by their feelings of sexual attraction or by how they feel their sexual tendencies compare to gender stereotypes. They will say, “I am gay. I am straight. I am bi-sexual. I am a Tom-boy. I am effeminate. I am transgender. I am queer...” etc. Whereas these were once simply statements of feelings, many now establish their *primary* allegiance and their ultimate identity based upon their sexual feelings regarding attraction and gender and those communities that form around sexual attraction and gender. Many people now will say, “It’s not just about how I feel...it’s who I AM.”

So why do human beings give ultimate value to jobs, virtues, responsibilities, heritage or sexual feelings to the degree that these things determine their identity?

In his book, *The Prodigal Prophet*, Timothy Keller writes:

The Bible explains why this is the case. We were made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26-27). There can be no image without an original of which the image is a reflection. “To be in the image” means that human beings were not created to stand alone. We must get our significance and security from something of ultimate value outside us. To be created in God’s image means we must live for the true God or we will have to make something else god and

orbit our lives around that. Identity is always rooted in the things we look toward to save us, the things to which we give ultimate allegiance. To know who you are is to know what you have given yourself to, what controls you, what you most fundamentally trust.<sup>1</sup>

That one quote is probably enough for us to chew on for the rest of the week. I hope you can see what Keller is saying.

Human beings, by virtue of the way we are made, must find our identity and our significance from something or someone outside of us. Now...that spits in the face of our Western individualism. Our Western individualism says, “Nobody tells me who I am. I look inside of myself and discover who I am, and then I go out and strive to be true to myself, regardless of what other people think.” Really? So why do you post so many pictures of yourself on social media? Why do you constantly tell stories about yourself and your exploits? Why do you get so offended when someone upstages your talent? Why are you so easily angered when you feel that others “disrespect” you? Do you see the problem?

No matter how stubborn we are about our individualism, we need others to acknowledge our individualism or we don’t know who we are. We need others to admire us, to tell us how unique we are, to affirm our preferred “image” of ourselves because we are incapable of affirming that image on our own. Our identity is, in the end, the image or the reflection of an Ultimate Other. That Ultimate Other whose image we reflect is either God, or something we have given ultimate value and made into a god.

How do we know if we have made something into a god? We must ask ourselves these questions: What or who do I look to for my safety? What or who do I depend on to save me from obscurity? What or who holds my ultimate allegiance? What or who controls me? What or who do I trust above all others? What or who does my life orbit around? What or who do I fear?

Listen again to the way Jonah identifies himself: “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”

Now which part of his identity statement do you believe? He made two claims regarding his identity: 1) a racial claim regarding his people and his nation; and 2) a religious claim about the God he fears. Which claim do you think reveals the deepest truth about who he is? His racial claim, right? How do we know? Because when his ultimate commitment to country was tested by God’s command to go to Nineveh, Jonah didn’t actually fear the LORD...he feared something else. The LORD did not control Jonah, something else did. The LORD was not Jonah’s hope of salvation; running from the presence of God was his hope of salvation.

Notice that the sailors get this immediately. The text states: Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, ‘What is this you have done!’ In other words, Jonah, if you truly fear the God who created the sea and the dry land, how is it that you are running away from His presence

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Keller, [The Prodigal Prophet](#), p. 49.

and consequently putting all our lives at risk? If you actually feared the LORD, we wouldn't be in this storm. The god you say that you fear is not apparently the god you serve.

Like many of us, Jonah was self-deceived. He had a narrative about himself that he was a faithful prophet of God who feared the LORD. His actions, however, reveal his deepest allegiance...and so do his words. Jonah is first and foremost a Hebrew. His identity orbits around his nation and his people. That's not to say that he didn't have NEED of the LORD...he most certainly did, but only to the end that the LORD would bless his people. Jonah's fear of the LORD ceased to serve his primary allegiance when God commanded him to offer the opportunity of mercy to Israel's enemy. In other words, if the LORD was not committed to Israel's flourishing and their enemy's destruction, Jonah wanted nothing to do with the LORD...thus he ran directly away from the presence of the LORD.

Church, many of us have a narrative regarding our faith in God and our allegiance to Christ, but what happens when that narrative is put to the test? Do we truly fear God, or do we look to God to serve our agenda and our deepest allegiance, which is actually something other than God?

For example: I wonder how many of us come to church on Sunday because we long for God to bless our businesses. Our lives orbit around our business, yet we come to church hoping that we can convince God to bless our business if we do enough religious things and give some money to the church.

For others, we pray that God will bless our children because, if we are honest, our children hold ultimate value in our lives. Our lives orbit around our children. We have made idols out of our children, yet we say prayers and try to do good religious things so that God will bless our idolatry.

Remember, idols of the heart are formed when good things become ultimate things in our lives. Many of us have unknowingly given ourselves to idols of the heart, and the consequences of that idolatry are predictable and painful.

## **II. Blindness and Hostility**

Lest you think we are reading a bit too much into this story of Jonah, I would point you to exhibit B: the Apostle Peter. Peter represents the very best in well-intentioned, honest, devoted Jesus-followers. Peter was strong, loyal, and committed to following Jesus. He was the default leader of the Twelve, and Jesus promised that He would build His church around Peter and his confession of Jesus as the Son of God.

So, is it any surprise that when Jesus predicts that the disciples will fall away in Matthew 26:31, Peter responds in vs. 33, "Though they will all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Peter is absolutely confident in his faithfulness to Jesus. He compares himself to others and decides that he is certainly the most brave and the most loyal disciple in the room. And yet,

here's what we know: a few hours later, Peter turns out to be the most cowardly of all the disciples. He denies even knowing Jesus just hours after claiming that he would never fall away.

Like Jonah, Simon Peter was completely blind to his flaws. Both men, though privileged in status and communion with God, failed to see their own weakness and sinful tendencies.

In Peter's case, the disciple's fundamental identity was not rooted as much in Jesus' gracious love for him as it was in his commitment and love to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> His self-regard was rooted in the level of commitment to Christ that he thought he had achieved as a "fully devoted follower of Christ."

Do you see how subtle Peter's idolatry was? Devotion to the LORD is a good thing; but when our achievement...even in religious devotion...becomes our ultimate source of confidence and security, we become blind to our own flaws.

Keller points out two tendencies that can be observed in those who root their identity in something other than God's gracious love for us.

The first is blindness to one's real self. Let's say that, like Peter, you pride yourself on being brave and courageous. At all times you are working to protect and enhance your image of one who is brave and courageous. If you ever failed to be brave and courageous, you would no longer be you...so that means denying that you are ever afraid of anything, when of course, you are actually afraid of everything that might challenge your fragile, self-made identity.

Keller writes: If you base your identity on any kind of achievement, goodness, or virtue, you will have to live in denial of the depth of your faults and shortcomings. You won't have an identity secure enough to admit your sins, weaknesses, and flaws.<sup>3</sup>

The second tendency of those with a shallow identity is hostility for people who are different. Jonah wanted the Ninevites to burn. He couldn't see past his idolatry of nation to empathize with a people who did not know their right hand from their left. His hostility carried over into the way he dealt with the pagans on the boat. Jonah would not pray for their safety. Jonah would not join the sailors to help lighten the ship for the common good of everyone on board. Whenever our identity is based in achievement, nationalism or some particular virtue, we always feel compelled to reinforce our identity by contrasting ourselves with others which inevitably leads to hostility towards those who are "other" than we are.

When I lived in Eastern NC, my best friend, Jeff Davis, and I were pretty proud of our striper fishing abilities, and I remember how we took great pride at catching more fish than "those idiots who didn't know what they were doing." My fragile identity was based upon my fishing achievements, and I felt the need to belittle others in order to reinforce the image I wanted people

---

<sup>2</sup> Keller, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, p. 54.

to see in me. I would like to believe that I am no longer blind and hostile due to my fishing achievements, but old idols are hard to eradicate from the human heart. I caught myself exaggerating the number of fish I caught just this week in a conversation with a friend. I will admit that I still enjoy people's compliments about my fishing abilities a bit too much!

Church, idols of the heart take root when we allow good things to become ultimate things. Love of nation is a good thing; but when our nationalism becomes an ultimate thing, we may find ourselves on a ship to Tarshish in an attempt to flee the presence of the very God we claim to fear. Faithful devotion to Christ is a good thing; but if we base our identity around our religious achievement, we will become increasingly blind to our own sin and we'll become hostile to those from other religions or other lifestyles. Fishing is a good thing; but if I base my identity around my fishing achievements, I'll become blind to my own pride and my subtle contempt for anyone who catches more fish than I do! We are all very susceptible to what we observe here in Jonah. In fact, I would say there are more of us who have this problem in the room today than those who don't.

If left unchecked...if our identities are not transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ...we will inevitably fall into the horrible practice of "othering."

### **III. Othering**

It's time now to go from preachin' to meddlin'.

At the close of the chapter, Keller writes:

What Jonah is doing is what some have called *othering*. To categorize people as *the Other* is to focus on the ways they are different from oneself, to focus on their strangeness and to reduce them to these characteristics until they are dehumanized. We then can say, "You know how *they* are," so we don't need to engage with them. This makes it possible to exclude them in various ways—by simply ignoring them, or by forcing them to conform to our beliefs and practices, or by requiring them to live in certain poor neighborhoods, or by just driving them out. Jonah is in desperate need of the very mercy of God that he finds so troubling. Under the power of God's grace his identity will have to change, as will ours.

Church, take Keller's words to heart. Because of our fragile identities formed around idols of the heart, we become blind to our own faults, we become hostile to people who are different than us, and we easily fall into the practice of "othering." We give so much attention to the differences and offensive practices of others that we forget that they are human beings just like the rest of us. We no longer see them as those whom Jesus came to save. We see them as *others*...as those we are justified to ignore, drive out, constantly criticize, and dismiss even as we become increasingly blind to our own sinful flaws and tendencies.

My maternal grandmother was the most "othering" person I have ever met. She "othered" black people, gay people, democrats, Catholics, women who wore pants and anyone else who did not fit into her conservative Baptist, King James only, white Republican world. I wish I could say she was unusual, but she's not. We are all quite capable of "othering" when we allow anything but God's unmerited grace to serve as the central, most important thing about our identity.

If you are uncertain about whether or not you are guilty of “othering,” let me ask you: which group of people would you hope “never enter the doors of our church”? Which group of people do you want to “keep your children from being exposed to”? Which group of people are “the problem with our country”? Which group of people should really be “locked up and kept away from the public square”? Which group of people would “do well to go back where they came from”? Which group of people simply “disgust” you?

Over the course of 35 years, I have heard every one of these expressions used by people INSIDE of the church.

“Othering” is so commonplace that we often don’t even realize we’re doing it. Many of us grew up in homes that made sport of “othering” so much that dehumanizing others has become normal behavior for us. But Church, can we agree that there is no place for “othering” within the Body of Christ? Jesus died for sinners. Jesus died for “others”...like you, and like me, and like those we regularly dehumanize with our “othering.”

I suspect you know that we are entering into a season when “othering” is not only commonplace but justified by many who call themselves Christians. It is an election year...it is the year of “othering.”

The political rhetoric of “the left” and “the right” is unapologetically designed to build “othering” camps. Along with the politicians and the press we hear countless religious leaders and authors who leverage end-time prophecies and Bibles wrapped in American flags to coerce dollars and votes out of their patriotic church members. “Othering” is like an Olympic sport during an election year. 2020 was the most intense “othering” season I have ever seen, and I suspect 2024 will be more of the same.

So Church, take a good hard look into your identity. Listen carefully to the words that come out of your mouth. Be open to the possibility that you have an “othering” problem. Talk about this question in your small groups. Invite your family to speak honestly into your life. Ask your friends to tell you the truth in love. What image are you reflecting? What do your lifestyle and your attitude say about your deepest allegiance? How blind are you to your own faults? How hostile are you to “others” who are different than you?

Listen: Everything you hold dear is soon to be tested, and the test will reveal your true allegiance. As Christians, our primary identity is given to us: we are sinners who have been forgiven by the unmerited grace of God, accomplished in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sin and rose again, conquering the power of sin and death. If your identity is rooted in God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness, then you will not be blind to your own mess, and you will have no reason to be hostile to others. As we have received grace, we will have the capacity to extend grace. As we have been accepted, so will we have the capacity to accept others. As we have been loved in the midst of our sin, so we will have the capacity to love those who sin

against us. As we have been forgiven, so we will have the ability to forgive. If our identity has been transformed by the sacrificial grace of Christ crucified, we will not dehumanize others, we will relate with those who are in need of grace. We will contribute to the common good and we will engage with a lost and hurting world. We will have an identity that is not easily rattled, easily offended, and easily angered. We won't base our identities around a cause or a virtue, our people or an achievement, or even our feelings—our identity will be firmly rooted in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Our identity will be firmly established as those chosen and adopted by God's unmerited grace.

Church, know who you are...be who you are. Be the light of Christ in this hurting culture, to the glory of God. Amen.

Will you pray with me?