

There are some weeks when I know what my sermon will be about way ahead of time – at the beginning of the week or even a few weeks before - and there are weeks where I'm not sure what I'll preach on until close to Sunday. I wasn't entirely sure what to talk about today but then (and this is something I haven't said often)... thanks Florida.

Some news came out this week about the Florida Department of Education's new standards for teaching middle school students about slavery in the United States. In response to Governor Ron Desantis' so-called "Stop WOKE Act" which, according to the New York Times, "prohibits instruction that could prompt student to feel discomfort about a historical event because of their race, sex, or national origin,"

There's been some back and forth among politicians on both sides about what the act actually says and I don't want to get into that; so I'll quote directly from Florida's State Academic Standards for Social Studies for 2023 where the DOE's benchmark clarification states "instruction includes how slaves developed skill which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit."

So, to help students – and, I assume, parents – not feel *uncomfortable* about our country's past, these guidelines say that schools should teach that human beings who were enslaved "developed skills which...could be applied for their personal benefit." In other words, slavery wasn't that bad?

We don't hear about the specific sins of Nineveh, but when Jonah shows up and calls out "Forty days more, and Nineveh is overthrown," the people and the king don't argue with Jonah or deny any wrongdoing or come up with excuses. They seem fully aware of their past sins. So, the king calls for national mourning and repentance: visual signs like wearing sackcloth and ashes; religious actions calling out to God; and personal action "turn back from [the] evil way[s] and from the outrage to which they hold fast." In *hopes* that God will turn back and relent from striking out against Ninevah with blazing wrath.

The people of Nineveh – led by the rules of their nation – analyze, apologize, and repent – turn back - from their past sins.

I'm sure it wasn't *comfortable* for them to do that. It's never comfortable for us to acknowledge the ways that we've strayed from God and wounded our

lives and the life of the world. But we've all done it: we've made bad choices in our lives and we've lived in and supported systems of government and education and business and power that have harmed God's Creation. And the only way to move forward is to analyze, apologize, and repent - turn away from what we've done wrong and turn towards God's way.

It's not always fun and easy and comfortable to learn about our history but it's necessary if we ever wish to change; if we ever hope to become better people; if we ever hope for the world to become a better place.

We're  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through Jonah's story. We've seen Jonah's reluctance to follow God's call and we've heard a little about Jonah's feelings about the people of Nineveh (and we'll hear more about that next week). I think it's fair to say that Jonah probably hates the Ninevites. He doesn't want to go and tell them that they're wrong because he has no faith that they will ever *change* their ways. (We see in this chapter that he's completely wrong about that.) Jonah spends all of his time focused on *Nineveh* and their sins and he never takes any time to look at *himself*.

Probably because that would be uncomfortable.

So, anyway, I was talking about Florida: let me tell you how bad they are and how much I hate .... Oh.

It's so easy to focus on others and blame others. In many ways, that's the core of the controversy around what we teach about our history. It's so easy to say "I never owned a slave, so I have nothing to apologize for." It's so easy to say that was *someone else's* actions, *someone else's* fault.

But when we ignore our history, we don't see or understand how our *past* impacts our *present*. We're blind to the fact that hundreds of years of slavery created systems of inequality that still exist today. We're unaware of the fact that people like me have a hell of a lot more privilege and opportunity and safety nets than others. When we ignore our history we ignore the fact that our fellow children of God *continue* to suffer.

The Brookings Institution estimates that the average white family in the United States has approximately *10 times* the amount of wealth as the average Black family. And white college graduates possess more than

*seven times* more wealth than Black college graduates. And that's just one sign of the ways that others suffer.

Earlier this month, King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands apologized for his country's role in the enslavement of Africans and asked for forgiveness, following a similar apology from the country's prime minister last December.

Many West African nations and tribes including leaders from Benin, Ghana, and Cameroon, have issued apologies for their role in the transatlantic slave trade to black Americans.

While there have been separate apologies at different times put forth from the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, the United States has not formally apologized for the enslavement of Africans.

Probably because that would be *uncomfortable*.

"Forty days more, and Nineveh is overthrown." Jonah called out. And the people of Nineveh trusted God, and they called a fast and donned sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least.

The king said, "they shall call out to God with all their might, and every one of them shall turn back from his evil way and from the outrage to which they hold fast. Who knows? Perhaps God will turn back and relent and turn back from [God's] blazing wrath, and we shall not perish."

Here's the good news: in the words of the prophets from *Jonah: A Veggie Tales Movie*, "Praise the Lord, He's the God of second chances. You'll be floored by how his love enhances. You can be restored from your darkest circumstances. Our God is the God of second chances."

Sometimes, people talk about the "unchanging nature of God," and claim that things that we have understood God to have said or done will never change and because of that, *our* thinking should never change. But look right here at this scripture. "And God saw their acts, that they had turned back from their evil way, and God relented from the evil that [God] said to do to them and did not do it."

We are made in the image of God. Our creating, caring, loving, forgiving God. Our God who looks around when necessary and realizes when mistakes were made and what choices were wrong. Our God who turns

back and promises to do better next time and make better choices than doing things like, you know, flooding the entire planet and only saving one family or doing whatever God was considering doing in Nineveh. Analyzes, apologizes, and repents.

We are created in the image of our God. If God can learn from mistakes and change, we too can do the uncomfortable work of examining our personal and our communal history with all of our conflict, doubt and fears; we can apologizing for wrongs that we have done and wrongs done in our name, and we can receive God's welcome, pardon, and cleansing, so that we can turn back to God's way; so that we can do better.

Our God is a God of second chances. Our God is a God of forgiveness. Our God is a God of love, and peace, and justice. Our God is a God who accepts us and loves us just as we are.

If God can do all of that for us, surely we can do that for each other. Amen?