

WHEN LOVE COMES TO TOWN – Week 3

Monday, November 22

Have you ever run from God? That was the story of a man I met years ago. He lived in north Florida, and I was invited to stay in his home while serving on a mission project. When I first arrived at his house, the first thing I noticed was his car. There was a painted message on it that read: “God’s Car.” I knew there must be a story behind the car, and I was soon to hear it. Years earlier, this man felt that God was calling him to lay everything aside to serve Christ. He wasn’t sure at the time what it might mean, but it was at the time when his business was really taking off. He promised God that when his business was well-established he would have time, and he would respond to God’s call. And yes, his business went well, so well that he put off fulfilling his promise to God again and again. I thought of Jonah and the story of his running from God. Jonah was a prophet God called to serve in Israel, yet God asked Jonah to do the most surprising thing. God asked him to go to the city of Nineveh, a pagan city that stood against Israel. The people of Nineveh were known for their wickedness, and they were Israel’s enemies.

Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, ² “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.”³ But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord. -Jonah 1:1-3

Now, as we read Jonah’s story, his story is more than the reaction of one prophet of God. His actions reflect the general feeling Israel had toward outsiders. The remarkable thing about Abraham, and God’s calling of him, was that God had a purpose for Abraham in the world. His life would reflect God’s holiness, God’s character, and he would serve as God’s priest for the world. That meant Abraham would stand between the living and the dead. He would stand in the breach between God and humankind. We see God working to draw Abraham into this role time and again. This was to be the mission of the people of God for the years to come, but Israel shirked their mission. Yes, they missed the purpose God had for them. You can see their history reveals that God was always working to restore them to their purpose, but Israel refused. That is the story of Jonah. God sends him on a mission trip, and Jonah decides it is time to take a vacation and run from God.

Of course, you can’t run from God. As the man I met in Florida learned. Years passed and tragedy struck in the form of a heart attack. His wasn’t the kind of heart attack he would recover from. Instead, doctors informed him that his life would never be the same. It was then he realized what he had done putting God off and shirking God’s plan for his life. As a result, he put his entire life on a completely different footing. He recognized that everything he had belonged to God, hence the sign painted on his nice car. He would run no more and would seek to use what time was left of his life to serve Christ. Of course, he could have done this in his business all along, but he had never seen it that way. Now, he saw everything as a way that he could serve God. As I think of his story, it may reflect on our own. If we belong to Christ, God has a mission for us in his world. God plans to work through us to extend his grace. Here is the apostle Paul explaining our calling:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. -2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Yes, like Jonah, God has entrusted to us a message. We have been given the message of hope, the message of grace in Jesus. In the world, God makes his appeal through his people. Those words are powerful. He has no other plan for sharing his grace. We are the ones that become God’s ambassadors. Think of how ambassadors live. First, they know they come from another country, and they represent their homeland in the way they live. They are to show forth the life and values of their home country. They are dedicated to this way of life. This is what God has

called us to do in Jesus. We live the life of the kingdom of Jesus, and we represent our king in all that we do. I think that is what the man I met felt about his life and why he painted the message on his car. It seemed strange, but his life became a message of dependence on God and gratitude to God.

I asked earlier, have you ever run from God? Likely, we have not boarded a boat and tried to escape God's presence. It is more likely that we have denied or rejected the calling we have from God to be his servants. As with Jonah, I believe God is working to restore us to the mission he has for us. What mission do you believe God has for you in the city? Part of the purpose of this study is to consider why God has us in the city and how we are to live here as subjects of his kingdom.

Let's pray:

Gracious and loving God, we don't often think about your purposes at work in our lives or that we have a calling from you. Restore to us the awareness that you have made us your ambassadors, and that you are making your appeal to the world through us. There are days when we do not feel like we are appealing. Cause your lovingkindness and grace to flow in our lives by your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tuesday, November 23

I love the sheer honesty of the Christian writer Phyllis Theroux. She began an article that appeared in the New York Times in this way: Many years ago, I took a civil service entrance exam that contained certain questions designed to sort out the people who had "Messiah Complexes" or thought that J. Edgar Hoover was giving them varicose veins. Those questions were easy to spot, although the only one that still sticks in my mind is "Do you think you are a special agent of God?" I paused, thought about all the government benefits which hung upon my answer, and wrote, "No." Then Phyllis stated, "I would like to think that under the same circumstances, Mr. Hoover might have lied too!" (New York Times, July 17, 1980) Yes, it's funny, but think about it. Do we live our lives like what we do matters? Like we have a commission from God? That is one of the questions of this week as we look at the story of Jonah. He knew that God had a mission for him, but he would have nothing of it. He ran from the Lord and boarded a ship. But that is not the end of the story. Jonah's actions put an entire ship in peril. The Lord sent a storm. Here's what happened during the storm.

The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.¹⁴ Then they cried out to the Lord, "Please, Lord, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, Lord, have done as you pleased."¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the Lord, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows to him. -Jonah 1:11-16

Now, we read the story of Jonah and get hung up on the great fish that swallowed him. If so, we miss the point. The story is about Jonah and the Lord. By this time, Jonah knows the storm has arisen because of him. He doesn't use this time to repent of what he has done. He asks the sailors to throw him overboard. In truth, they seem to fear God more than Jonah does. They did everything they could to protect Jonah's life. That's why they tried to return to shore. They were better people, likely more moral than Jonah himself. Jonah cared nothing about the city of Nineveh, but the sailors are trying to save him. This is sad, but often true. The most moral person in your neighborhood may be someone that does not even believe in God. They may be more honest, more humble, more fair-minded than you are. That means you are not in Christ because you are a good person. Your place with God is all of grace. Israel had this pride that said they were better. It's true: They were God's chosen people. But, in reality, they had wandered far from the Lord. Their place with God was all gift. But they couldn't see that. Instead, they felt superior to their neighbors. This is important to see because it is easy to look at our neighbors, to look at the

city and be filled with pride, to think we are better than others. But this is a trap that keeps us from enjoying grace and keeps us from sharing God's love in our city. Salvation is not about who is good enough because no one is good enough. It is about the goodness of God and his mercy toward those that come to him with nothing but faith. We are saved by faith alone because of God's grace alone. Often it is our sense of goodness that keep us from enjoying God's grace and also keeps us from loving our neighbors.

I love what happens next. Very reluctantly the sailors throw Jonah overboard. They cry out to the Lord for his mercy, and they make a sacrifice to the Lord right then and there. At this point, we should be more concerned about where Jonah stands with God than the sailors. As today, sailors were not known to be the most spiritually inclined. But their honor given to God is unmistakable. It looks a lot like worship. They make a connection between what is happening in their world and the God that is sovereign over it all.

Now, I want to return to Phyllis Theroux and her comment about being a secret agent of God. The question was put on her secret service exam to weed out people that perhaps were a little unbalanced or who are grandiose. In psychological parlance, this is a person with an exaggerated sense of one's importance, power, knowledge, or identity, with no evidence to support this belief. But isn't this what God tells us is the case? We are on mission from him. We may run from that, but clearly this is what the book of Jonah is there in part to teach us. Not that we are more important than we are. We know God's grace makes the difference in us and in our world. But because we are called to bear his grace in the earthly city. When I think of Jonah I think of Jesus, the man that looked to others just like any other man, but was the son of man and the son of God. I think of his obedience and faithfulness, how he was faithful to the Lord in everything, but you can find not a whiff of pride in him. How he did not come to judge, but to give his life as a ransom for many. This is the gospel that we rest in today.

Let's pray together:

Loving God, our problem with pride can be so pervasive that we cannot see it. This keeps us from loving others and for fully enjoying your grace. Forgive us, Lord. Restore in us the joy of our salvation. Remind us of your love for our city, and teach us how to love it too! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, November 24

Here's our text for today. We hear the prayer of Jonah from the belly of the fish:

Jonah 2:7-9

"When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord, and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple. ⁸ "Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. ⁹ But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.'"

The book of Jonah, at this point, reads like a death and resurrection story. Jonah can see his life pass before his eyes. His death seems imminent. But here is the place where he finally turns toward the Lord. For us, it may not be until our lives are stripped away that we turn our attention to God. Days of difficulty produce in us desperate and honest prayers that otherwise may never come. During Jonah's dark night of the soul, he can see that he has turned toward idols and away from God. No, he has not bowed down before statues of stone. He has put something before God in his heart. That is idolatry. An idol is anything in our lives that becomes more important than the Lord himself. And, idols are tricky. They often come in the form of good things, but those good things get too great a place in our hearts.

I remember years ago reading the story of Phil Vischer. He is the creator of a video series called Veggie Tales, the best-selling line of animated Christian children's videos in history. Phil set out to do something good, but in the process made an idol of the very thing he sought to use for the sake of the gospel. His goal from the start was to present the message of scripture in a format children would love. As an animator, he brought extraordinary vision and creativity to his project. But he was impatient with his vision and ultimately lost it all in bankruptcy. It was in the belly of

the fish, in his dark night of the soul, he came to realize how far he had wandered from God. He said: "The more I dove into scripture, the more I realized I had been deluded. I had grown up drinking a dangerous cocktail—a mix of the gospel, the protestant work ethic, and the American dream... The savior I was following, in hindsight, equal parts Jesus, Ben Franklin, and Henry Ford. My eternal value was rooted in what I could accomplish." Yes, while he was doing good things, the good thing became the idol. I think that is what happened to Jonah. By being the faithful Jew, he began to idolize his ethnicity and status rather than trust the God that loved him. Jonah's take on it all is: *Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.* He'd been clinging to his virtue of being Jewish rather than the love of God given to him.

Now, we might wonder what our idols are and how we can root them out. As we have seen, our idols are often good things that we give ultimate value to. It may be a career that you love and you come to live for rather than for God, or a relationship that you could not do without that really owns your heart, not God. These things are good, but when we make them most important in our lives, we miss out on God's love. We miss God himself, the One that is the wellspring of life. Everything else will change, or we will lose over time, but God alone remains faithful to us. Now, in thinking about Jonah's story, it was his idol that kept him from going to Nineveh. It was his idol that kept him from loving his enemies. At this point, he can see his idol, and we hear the sounds of joy and praise during this dark night. This really is amazing. He doesn't yet know that he will live. He isn't freed from the fish or the sea, but he has joy. This is a sign of conversion. Our hearts behold grace, and we rejoice with gratitude to God. It is here that we find, in the words of Jonah, the clearest and briefest presentations of the gospel. He says it like this: *Salvation comes from the Lord.* It is as simple as that. Salvation doesn't come from our performance or what we can accomplish, as Phil Vischer came to see. It is all the gift that comes from God. This is a dramatic discovery and the turning point in Jonah's life and in this little book. It is also the turning point for us as well. I really think this is when we come to understand the mission that we have and the joy of it all. Our mission in the secular city is not a burden, but a response of joy to the grace we have received. How can we not share it? It doesn't come from feelings of superiority, but as one missionary explained: one beggar telling another beggar where to get bread. We are all beggars and without hope, except for the mercy and goodness of God. From this vantage point, Jonah says that he will do what the Lord has commanded. He will fulfill his calling and be the prophet God called him to be from the beginning. As we read about Jonah's time in the belly of the fish, we hear his words as an encouragement to forsake our idols and to follow Christ. This is a scary thing for us because we often built our lives around the security that our idols promise to provide to us. But the truth is they cannot deliver on their promises in any lasting way. We can only depend on God to be faithful, always faithful. Jesus talked about Jonah in his preaching ministry to explain what would happen in his death and resurrection. He would die, and three days later rise showing forth his power to save. Because of this we know we can trust in him. He will do all that he has promised.

Let's pray:

Holy God, our heavenly Father, we so easily become distracted from you and your grace. We turn to idols, and we miss the joy of living in your grace. Thank you that my salvation does not depend on my efforts and my faithfulness, but on the faithfulness of Jesus. For I pray in his name. Amen.

Thursday, November 25 - Thanksgiving Day

Happy thanksgiving. We stop for a minute to thank God for his goodness and his mercy. That was the theme of worship this past Sunday, the surprising mercy of God. We may think the book is about the failed and reluctant prophet Jonah, and it is in part. But it is more. It reveals the depths of God's mercy. Yesterday we heard from Jonah the shortest and clearest presentation of the gospel: Salvation comes from the Lord. We don't earn or produce it. We cannot find our way to God. God does it all for us in Christ. Let us give thanks for God's kindness and goodness today, remembering all that we enjoy flows from the character of our loving God.

Now, if yesterday was the turn in the story of Jonah, today is the turn of the story in Nineveh. We have learned that the Assyrian people were brutal and ruthless with their enemies. They took pride in the way they tortured their enemies. They didn't hide what they did. It became the

subject of their national art and their history. They boasted of their exploits. They took pride in the power to dominate and destroy. The Assyrians were the experts in this craft. Their story makes us wonder: are there people that are just not redeemable? Are there stories so broken that wholeness is impossible? We can begin to see how strange it is that God would make Nineveh the focus of his mercy, and how expected that Jonah would want to have no part in it.

Here's our text for today:

Jonah 3:1-5

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ² "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you." ³ Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

For Jonah, it took a near-death experience to get him on mission. He arrives to find Nineveh is prosperous and very large. It is awash in people. Can you imagine a Jewish prophet walking the streets for three days checking the place out! He did not want to be there, but he is in the middle of the city. There was no other way for him to deliver God's message. Think of the places Jesus walked so that he could minister to the people in Galilee, and also in Judah and Jerusalem. We are told that once he went through Samaria with his disciples. That is where Jesus met the woman at the well. That is a place the Jews avoided walking through because they thought the Samaritans were unfaithful half-breeds. It is true that they were Israelites that had intermarried when the northern kingdom fell. But really, you would even pass through their town! There are communities in Miami-Dade county that you may avoid even driving through. Perhaps, you do not feel safe. The Jews avoided Samaria over a sense of moral superiority. Yet, this is where Jesus went with his disciples. Then Jesus spoke with a woman at a well in the middle of the day. No woman goes to draw water in the middle of the day, the heart of the day, unless she has been rejected by the other women. No Jewish man would speak in public with a woman, period. Jesus, in this scene, crosses all the barriers erected between people. Race. Religion. Gender. Status. This is the nature of his ministry. Here is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor, explaining:

God is not ashamed of human lowliness but goes right into the middle of it...God draws near to the lowly, loving the lost, the unnoticed, the unremarkable, the excluded, the powerless, and the broken. What people say is lost, God says is found; what people say is "condemned," God says is "saved." Where people say No! God says Yes! Where people turn their eyes away in indifference or arrogance, God gazes with a love that grows warmer there than anywhere else. Where people say something is despicable, God calls it blessed.

God's ways are not ours at all. That is why the Lord sends Jonah to Nineveh. This is not where anyone would expect to see a revival, but this is just what happens. Jonah preaches hellfire and damnation, and the people hear it as grace. They have an opportunity to change course. They repent and turn to God in humility. Jonah must be stunned to see the response. The reluctant prophet shares a message of doom, and the people's hearts are changed. It looks here like their hearts become more responsive and tender toward the Lord than poor Jonah himself. We think of the ministry of Jesus and how God worked through the most hated thing in the world, the Roman cross, the execution device of the most powerful empire at that time. The goal of the cross was humiliation and destruction. It announced to the world: if you defy us then this is what will happen to you. Yet, in the despicable, God has chosen to redeem us. The thing people would look away from became the beautiful cross because there the Lord of heaven demonstrated his love for sinful humanity. There God saved us. I am not sure there is anything we can be more thankful for this thanksgiving day. The grace given to the people of Nineveh prefigures the grace God has for us. God chose in the Assyrians the worst of the worst, and he demonstrated that he is a God of grace and mercy. Then he relented when they repented and turned to him. How boundless is this mercy of God to forgive such great sinners! This is how God treats us when we turn to him. His grace seems, and is, unending. Let's put it like this. The true measure of the Lord's love is that he loves without measure. Yes, God goes right into the middle of lowliness. It

doesn't deter him one little bit... *loving the lost, the unnoticed, the unremarkable, the excluded, the powerless, and the broken.*

Let's pray together:

Lord God, the lover of our souls, how can we not thank you on this day? You have given us life, and you have redeemed our lives from the pit and crowned us with glory and honor. You set your affection on us and, in Christ, you have brought us into your family. We thank you for your goodness and mercy, and we pray in your name. Amen.

Friday, November 26

What makes you angry, I mean, really angry? Jesus became angry when he saw that the temple, the place set aside for people to seek the Father, had been turned into a den of robbers. It looked more like a flea market than a sanctuary. And, the worst kind of business was taking place there. It was a sort of religious extortion. All the while, the name of the Lord was being scandalized. Jesus became angry enough that he fashioned a whip and cleared the area of the moneychangers. Now, as the book of Jonah ends, we find the prophet Jonah hopping mad. He's not just a little bit irritated.

Here's how our text reads:

Jonah 4:1-4

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ² And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³ Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?"

Do you know what got Jonah angry? It was that the Lord relented and did not bring destruction on his enemies in Nineveh. Jonah preached a hellfire and brimstone message, and it worked. Or a better way to say it is that God worked. The people repented, and they fasted and prayed. It was a bona fide revival from the king on down to the lowest people in the city. In the midst of this remarkable moment of God's mercy, Jonah became ticked. The truth is, he wanted to see the Assyrians pay for what they had done. They didn't deserve forgiveness from God. Maybe that was the thing; Jonah felt like a good guy. He'd been serving God, making great sacrifices to follow the Lord. And here were a bunch of evil misfits, deplorables for sure, and God set his affection on them. That is just plain wrong, is it not? This is how we think. We should oppose evil and evil people. They cannot be forgiven.

Simon Wiesenthal wrote an amazing account from his experience as a Jewish prisoner during WWII in his book entitled *Sunflower*. It is a painful story. Here's what happened: Wiesenthal was one day called from his work detail by a nurse to the bedside of a dying Nazi soldier. The soldier told him that he was seeking forgiveness for a horrible crime he perpetrated. He was close to death, and he needed forgiveness. A year earlier, he participated in the destruction, by fire and with guns, of a house of 300 Jews. He and the other soldiers set the building on fire, and when the people began to jump out of the windows, they gunned them down. Wiesenthal heard the story of the soldier, and then he walked from the room without saying anything to the soldier. He refused to offer forgiveness. Later, Wiesenthal asked various people to consider whether he should have forgiven the soldier and allowed him to die in peace. Some that responded said yes, forgiveness should be extended to the man. Others said it should be refused, and to give forgiveness is to dishonor the victims and minimize the actions of the soldier. It would make light of what the man had done. It would be unjust and wrong to forgive the man. Add to that, who was he to forgive a man for killing others. They had done nothing to him. How could he forgive? The question is: Where do you stand? Jonah took his stand in anger against God because he thought it was wrong that the Lord should show mercy to the people of Nineveh. They deserved judgement but God gave them mercy. Are there limits to God's mercy? Should there be limits to ours? Jonah feels so strongly about this that he would rather die than live in a world where justice is not done. But, Jonah is missing a piece of the story, and so was Wiesenthal. First, we need to know that God values and defends justice far more than we do. We can become outraged when

we hear of injustice in the world. When it comes into our lives, we are furious and feel that someone must pay. God is angry about sin as well, but there is more. He does something about it. How could God forgive the people of Nineveh? How can he forgive us? One has come into our world that lived in righteousness in every way. It was he, the Lord Jesus, who settled the issue of justice in his blood by his death on the cross. It is his death that settles the score and actually provides a forgiveness that settles the justice of God. It may not settle human justice. There remains the human need to punish the criminal, but with God our sins can be forgiven because of what Jesus did. The point from the book of Jonah is that God gave a mercy and forgiveness that was scandalous to Jonah. To Jonah, it was just plain wrong. No doubt, Jonah had been raised with a hair-trigger sense of the justice of God. God is holy and cannot accept any sin. It is abhorrent and opposed to the way God created our world. In this case, God seems in the wrong to Jonah. But now with the missing piece of the puzzle, with Jesus, the ways of God come into focus. None of us can stand before God on our own. Each of us needs grace. But Jesus has accomplished justice for us, bringing us life and forgiveness and peace with God. Now, there may be those that God has forgiven that offend your sense of justice, but it is up to God to forgive.

Let's pray:

Cause us, O Lord, to love mercy, to love your mercy. Pour out your mercy on us, and on our city. Help us to trust that what Jesus has done is enough. Make us bearers of your message of hope, to the praise of your glorious name. Through Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Saturday, November 27

Penny wise and pound foolish is the saying. Have you ever lost a lot trying to save a little? This is what we might think of when we think of Jonah. Here's what happened in his story. After becoming angry with God, Jonah positioned himself outside of the city of Nineveh. Likely, he hung around because he wanted to see the Lord destroy the city. He wanted to see it burn. That would affirm everything he believed about justice and the fact that God's duty is to make sure everyone gets what they deserve. What Jonah didn't count on was the mercy of God. While he was waiting, the sun was oppressive. To relieve Jonah, God caused a vine to grow up and give him shade. What a relief it must have been. Jonah was spared the heat of the sun. But then the sun scorched the vine, and it withered and died.

Here is where our story picks up:

Jonah 4:9-11

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." ¹⁰ And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"

Do you get God's point? He tells Jonah that he did nothing to make the plant grow. It was all a gift. Yet, he became angry when it was taken from him. Here Jonah is angry because his shade plant died, yet the fate of such a great city of Nineveh didn't even register for Jonah. Truthfully, he didn't care about the people that lived there at all. Now, this is more than a reproach for Jonah's narcissism. The Lord is showing Jonah that what he cares about is insignificant in comparison to the value of the people of Nineveh.

Now, just hearing this should be a delight to us. People matter to God. Even people that we consider evil, people far away from God, matter to God. Jonah has no love for the people of Nineveh. He does not understand the heart of God. Why would God even send him to such an evil city as Nineveh? God's love does not seem rational to us. You see, ever since the first human beings turned away from God, God has been working a plan to bring about salvation and the redemption of our entire world. What an amazing story this is that we are living in. We are not the result of a cosmic accident. The history of our world is not meaningless. God is pursuing humanity with his mercy, his steadfast love. It is this that we do not understand. Nor did Jonah. Jonah gets angry because his little vine died, and yet he isn't the least bit concerned about so large a city as Nineveh. The challenge for me is to learn the values of the God that made us. To love the city like

he does, to desire the redemption of the city as God planned in Christ. That is what the gospel is all about. It reveals that God loves the city. God loves us. This was the challenge for Jesus in his ministry. The religious leaders just could not understand why Jesus pursued people that were so far from God. Jesus was trying to teach them that everyone is far from God, but God has drawn near to them. Jesus loved lepers that were excluded from the social life of Israel. He forgave prostitutes that were considered hopeless sinners. He ate with tax collectors and went to the parties where respectable people wouldn't dare to be seen. When he was asked why he would do that, he remarked that doctors spend time with the sick, not pursuing the well. The truth is that we are all sick, but only some of us have figured that out. Some of Jesus' first followers were the most left out, lost, losers you could imagine. They were people that thought they had no hope until Jesus showed up, telling them that God loved them. So, we end this little series called When Love Comes to Town thinking about Jesus. Because he is the picture, the expression and the extension of this love in real life. His love continues to shock us. He stood with an adulterer when her accusers approached her to stone her to death. He sided with a chief collector and went to his house to show the man that the reach of God's love included him. He confronted the woman at the well and, at the same time, set her free from her hunger for approval. Jesus also told parables to reveal the truths that he lived. He told the audacious story of a shepherd that abandoned his ninety-nine sheep to go in search of the lost one. No shepherd would consider doing such a thing and leave the whole flock in danger. But just think of how you feel when you know that, no matter the cost, God will go in search of you when you are lost. He told the story of the son that betrayed his father and embarrassed the family when he demanded his inheritance. Of course, he blew it all and found himself in the worst state. But upon his return, his father ran to him, not requiring repayment or promises, but freely giving his son his mercy and his love. You see, there is nothing like this mercy in our world because it does not come from our world. It comes from God. This is why God told Jonah to think about his anger. Really, should he be angry about his little plant, and not care for so many people in so great a city? That's where I'd like to end. Considering how God cares for our city, as we come to know him and enjoy his mercy, we will care about our city, too!

Let's pray:

Lord God, how can we not marvel at your mercy? You have loved us and received us. You have not treated us as our sins deserved, or repaid us for our iniquities, but as far as the east is from the west, that is how far you have removed our sins from us. Lord, God, pour out your mercy on our city. Forgive our sins though they are many, and grant to us a rich repentance that causes us to turn to you. Thank you for your grace and mercy. We pray in your holy name. Amen.