

Head-to-Head with God and His Mission

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. (Psalm 67:1-3)

Footnote: As long as they are like us.

Birmingham, Alabama ...The Crusades...Darfur...Human Trafficking... Hitler...South Africa
...Slavery

In the news over the past year, we have heard a great deal about the oppression in Burma by the Burma Army. Burma is run by a military dictatorship. Recently we heard of Buddhist monks protesting the dictatorship. The Burma Army is an oppressive regime that has destroyed thousands of villages and displaced over 600,000 people and murdered many others. The World Survey of 2005 estimates that Burma has produced over 691,800 refugees. Thailand is housing over 140,000 in many refugee camps. It is a tragic present day account of ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to look at the world from the perspective of my own culture, viewing another culture as inferior to my own. Racism is a type of ethnocentrism, but dealing specifically with one's race as being superior. Ethnocentrist responses range anywhere from mild dislike to extreme oppression and murder. In all cases it results in walls of hostility being erected that separate and divide people.

Ethnocentrism has fueled some of the most outrageous forms of oppression throughout the history of the world. Unfortunately the church is not innocent in this and in many ways has perpetuated the problem. The Crusades are an example of this. The Holocaust and the Civil Rights movement of this century are examples of ethnocentrism that have destroyed the lives of many people, both using Biblical texts to justify their positions.

Ethnocentrism has also provided some rather humorous moments in our encounters with other cultures. While we were down in Mexico last March, we were honored by the people. They decided to "barbeque a goat" for us. This is typically only done for a wedding, so it was a big deal for them to do this for us. Mexican Barbeque is not like our barbeque. In some way they bury the meat and cook it underground for a long time. The meat is put into a tortilla and dipped into a hot sauce. Well, when we attempted to eat this delicacy, I found it quite difficult. It was probably the toughest meat I ever ate. Unable to bite a piece off (they do not use fork and knives) I decided to use the two-handed approach. Firmly bite down on the piece of meat and pull it away with both hands. This worked quite well, but I did not anticipate the resulting springing motion of the meat, which flipped the hot sauce into my eyes. This became a quite painful and awkward moment for all. I became less aggressive in my eating of this delicacy.

But ethnocentrism was clearly an issue God attempted to address throughout the history of Israel and was one of the first issues Jesus encountered when he began his ministry. And in the early days of the church, the Lord continued to deal with this issue in His followers. But rather than

fueling ethnocentrism, the Church must lead the way in reconciliation, for it is at the heart of what Jesus did in his death and resurrection.

Recount story of Jonah

Read Jonah 3:10 – 4:11

As Jonah is struggling to obey God's call on his life, he has a head-on collision with what I have come to call "God's Mission Statement." Before we get into this with Jonah, we need to understand where this statement comes from.

God originally reveals his mission statement to Moses after the account of Israel's sin of idolatry with the golden calf. This is found in Exodus 32-34. For the first time Moses encounters God withdrawing his presence from the nation and sending in His place an angel. Moses pleads with God for His presence to continue going with the people when he makes a bold request — He wants to see God's glory. God agrees, not only to go with the people but also to reveal His glory. As God passes in front of Moses he does not just see an image of God, he also sees the very character of God. This character is how God has chosen to interact with his people, thus His mission statement. As God told it to Moses:

The Lord, The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished.

It is found in some form 8 other times throughout the Old Testament, restated by the various writers in response to some situation they were dealing with. But Jonah uses it very differently from all others. He explains that this was the very reason that he disobeyed. ***He knew God was going to display his compassion for these people and he was not interested in being part of it.*** Why?

Ninevah was the capital city of the Assyrian empire, a hated enemy of Israel. Jonah was a prophet of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. He had actually been a rather successful prophet who predicted the expansion of Israel's territory during Jeroboam's reign. But going to Ninevah was not a fulfillment of Jonah's mission statement. Thus we have a conflict between what Jonah wanted to do and what God was going to do. Jonah was God's prophet, therefore Jonah needed to adjust his mission to God's mission. He refused to do so. When God relented from the calamity that he told Jonah to proclaim, Jonah became angry. He wanted to see this nation he so hated destroyed. Jonah's ethnocentrism blinded him to God's mission.

But God's plan has always been different. God made it clear when he called Abraham that he intended to bless all people's of the earth through Abraham:

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those

who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:1-3

Jonah also understood that God created all people in his image. All people everywhere have this same heritage of the image of God in them, regardless of their cultural background.

But Jonah is more concerned with his comfort than he is with the city, as seen when God provides shelter for Jonah — while he is waiting to see Ninevah destroyed! He becomes very angry when it is removed.

And here-in is the warning we must heed:

Our desire for comfort blinds us to the ethnocentrism that fuels our hatred for people different from ourselves. We become more concerned for our creature comforts than for the people around us, lost and suffering. This inhibits the work that God wants to do through us.

How did Jesus encounter this? During his inaugural sermon from Isaiah 61 where he identifies himself as the one who has the Spirit of the Lord upon himself, he refers to two people to whom God sent his prophets from the period of the Kings. The first was Elijah who was sent to a widow. He performed two miracles for this woman:

- an endless supply of flour and oil through a drought in the land and
- brought her son back to life, who had died while he was staying with them.

The second was Elisha who healed Naaman of leprosy.

In both cases, God sent his prophets to people outside the nation of Israel.

And what was the response from those who heard Jesus? They were furious, drove him out of town and were about to throw him over a cliff. God sent these prophets to Gentiles, it was an intentional act on God's part, and Jesus is saying that he is going to do the same thing!

But Jesus also had to deal with this in his disciples.

- Nathanael (John 1:45-51)
- James and John (Luke 9:51-56)
- Peter (Acts 10-11) - Cornelius and Peter's vision

This is such a huge issue. So how do we deal with it in ourselves.

1. First we have to recognize it and confess it for what it is!

This is something we are blind to. We come to scripture justifying our own perspective while condemning others. Several years ago I was walking around a mall in Kansas City desperately needing a haircut. While wandering around I stumbled on a salon that I had not been to and began walking toward it. Then I stopped and turned around. I was suddenly greatly convicted. Why did I stop and turn around? Because the woman that was going to cut my hair in this place was an African-American. At that moment God revealed something to me that I had not seen in myself. I was prejudiced. I was acting on my ethnocentrism. I had two options. I could keep

walking away thus fueling my racism or I could turn around and defeat it. By the grace of God, I turned around.

2. *We must allow ourselves to be uncomfortable.*

Discipleship is not a comfortable process. If you are not experiencing discomfort in your walk with Jesus or you are not placing yourself in uncomfortable situations, you should seriously question who you are following. I was rather uncomfortable that day in the hair salon, partly because she had a doo that I did not think was going to look very attractive on me. And that is the problem. We don't understand the culture, so we reject it as inferior. The only way to overcome it is by stepping into it, and that makes us uncomfortable.

3. *Seek to learn.*

There is nothing so affirming to a person as our willingness to enter in and simply listen and learn. Ask questions. Humbly position yourself as a learner.

4. *Intentionally place yourself into situations where you are confronting your ethnocentric attitudes.*

By avoiding these situations you will only nurture those attitudes.

When Moses saw the glory of God, he saw God's true character. Moses does not describe this revelation as, "The glory of God was like..." God revealed to Moses who He is: compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

This revelation happened one other time — The incarnation.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

The ethnocentric differences that we

- exaggerate between us as human beings
- the walls that we put up to separate ourselves,
- the divisions we create

do not begin to compare with the differences that exist between a holy God and sinful humanity. That is indeed an unspanable gulf. But because God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, He came to us!

In Jesus we see

God made flesh,
Immanuel,
God with us,

living out His mission statement among us. Where Jonah rebelled against it, Jesus showed us what it looks like. And he treats all people the same, regardless of background.

For Jesus is our peace. He has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... and His purpose was to create in himself one new person out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross,

by which he put to death their hostility. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, male or female; but Christ is all, and is in all. There is no difference between any of them or anyone.

Ephesians 2:14-22
Colossians 3:11-12

What surprises me about the account of Jonah, is not so much that God relented from sending destruction on the Ninevites, but rather how he treated Jonah. Here was a man who went head-to-head with God's mission of being compassionate and gracious. He rejected God's plan and rebelled. God demonstrates his compassion by sending the fish to keep Jonah from drowning. Then Jonah was angry with God for relenting from the calamity Jonah had warned the people about. God does not condemn or reject Jonah. What does he do? Consistent with His character of being compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, he provides a shelter for Jonah to comfort him. In a gentle attempt to reveal to Jonah what is in his heart, God takes away the shelter. Jonah is again upset, but God reveals his own heart: "Should I not be concerned for those people?"

God wants to reveal His glory to you. And what is His glory? That in spite of your pride, prejudice and ethnocentrism, he wants to show you that he is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Can you identify who that group of people is for whom you have erected a wall of hostility? Maybe it is not even an "ethnic" group. Maybe it is a particular type of sinner that you have a problem with. Maybe it is a class of people you find yourself resisting. The sin of ethnocentrism is fueled by pride and rather than bringing people together, it separates us.

Liberation UCC

I did not see them as people, I saw them as homosexuals. And so it is with all of us...

- We do not see them as people, we see them as alcoholics.
- We do not see them as people, we see them as homeless.
- The Pharisees did not see them as people, they saw them as tax collectors and sinners.

The story of Oskar Schindler

There is so much we have to gain in embracing cultural diversity. John, in his vision of the consummation of the Kingdom of God, gives us a taste of what this will be like:

There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,

and to the Lamb."

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

"Amen!
Praise and glory
and wisdom and thanks
and honor and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!"

Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?" I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore,

"They are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will spread his tent over them.
Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat upon them,
nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb at the center of the throne
will be their shepherd;
he will lead them to springs of living water.
And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

God wants to remove the dividing wall of hostility that stands between you and that other person, reconciling both you and them to God, thus creating one new people in the Kingdom of God. That's what Jesus did! And by the resurrection he proved it. But we don't have to wait for Jesus to return.

And so we pray...

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.