

The Worth of You

Jonah 1:1-10

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 16, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, ²“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their wickedness has come up before me.” ³But Jonah set out 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 his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD.

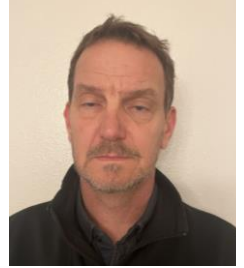
⁴But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵Then the sailors were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. ⁶The captain came and said to him, “What are you doing sound asleep? Get up; call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.”

⁷The sailors said to one another, “Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.” So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸Then they said to him, “Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” ⁹“I am a Hebrew,” he replied. “I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” ¹⁰Then the men were even more 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 so. (Jonah 1:1-10, NRSV)



I'm not somebody who posts a lot on social media, only every once in awhile. But recently I noticed that my profile photo on Facebook was out of date, so I thought I should at least update it. Interesting thoughts go through your mind when your thinking about what image of yourself you want to project to the rest of the world.

Here's a photo I considered. What do you think? A good choice? This was a photo I took when I needed to submit an application for a Kenyan visa just after I realized I needed a Kenyan visa two days before I was to travel to Kenya a year ago. The cameral doesn't lie; I was not in a good mood. Needless to say, I didn't choose that photo for my online profile.



As most of you know, one of the problems with social media is that everybody is generally trying to manage their images so that they come off in as good a light as possible to the rest of the world. If you just go by the social media posts of other people, nearly everybody appears to be living an idyllic life. That can be an incredibly depressing perception when compared to the less-than-idyllic life you know that you are living.

If we are willing to pay attention, one of the things we can learn from our efforts to manage our image – and let's be honest, we all do this to some extent – is that we can learn what it is that is most important to us. The thing we most value, that which most informs our identity, that is the thing we will put forward for others to see. So pay attention to yourself, not only when you are on social media, but when you are in conversations with others. What are the things you want others to know about you? Maybe you are always trying to steer conversations towards your job, particularly the success you have had with your career. Or maybe it's your kids, and their accomplishments. Maybe it is well-respected people who are in your contact list, and want others to know that you know these people. Maybe it's your volunteer work, your support of some good cause, or some political perspective, or places you have traveled in this world. What is it for you? Are you paying attention to that which you are hoping will give your life value?

Your identity is your sense of self. All of us naturally want to see ourselves as people of worth, and we hope our worthiness will lead others to value us, admire us, want to be with us, even love us. But that worth has to be established by something. What gives a priceless piece of art great value? It could be that is rare, or done with exquisite skill, or the product of some great

master. Something gives that piece of art value. So what is it that gives you value as a human being? What justifies your life?

None of us can escape this most important question. And there is nothing wrong with wanting to answer it. The problem is, not all of us honestly face the question. Certainly not all of us invest ourselves in things which actually satisfy this great desire of the human soul, which is to be found worthy. Worse, many people who are seeking their identity in places that will never satisfy, are never stepping back to ask whether or not they are making a wise investment. That's a tragic mistake, because this may be the most important thing you will ever consider in life. This is a question that deserves our full and sustained attention. The story of Jonah, especially the part we are focused on today, can help us do exactly that.

When we last left our "hero", Jonah had just been awakened from a deep sleep down in the hold of a sinking ship. The storm which is about to take the boat under is his fault, a consequence of his willful disobedience to God's command. In a desperate attempt to save their lives, the rest of the crew has prayed to every god they can think of, and tossed every bit of cargo overboard to try to lighten the load. When the captain of the ship discovers Jonah has slept through the whole ordeal he is furious, and commands Jonah to wake up and pray to his God. Interestingly enough, Jonah doesn't do it, at least the story doesn't tell us that he does. He knows that the Lord has sent this storm because of his sin. He knows that unless the storm subsides, they are likely all going to die. But he won't pray.

As a last option, the crew casts lots to determine which one of them is to blame for this disaster. They are convinced that it is because of the sin of somebody on that boat that some god or another has unleashed this fury. Casting lots in those days was common when people wanted to reveal something or someone that was hidden, or to render an impartial, unbiased decision on some important matter. In our day we flip coins or play rock-paper-scissors. It's a bit like that, but with a sense that God, or the gods, would affect the outcome. So they cast lots, which were probably different colored stones, to find out who is the guilty party. Jonah is there watching this happen, and is the only one who already knows the outcome. He's probably already anticipating that he is about to be the last piece of 'cargo' thrown overboard to save the ship. The verses that follow seem to affirm that he has resigned himself to this fate.

Sure enough, all signs point to Jonah. But the reaction of the sailors, especially in light of the fact that this is the guy who has been sleeping through it all and refusing to pray, is surprising in how gracious it is. They have every right to toss Jonah overboard immediately once they realize that he boarded their ship fully knowing that he was an active target of divine retribution. It's another example of a theme that runs through this entire story, that there are actually people outside of God's family who are more honest, more compassionate, more generous, full of more integrity, than some people, mainly Jonah, who are inside of God's family. We should not be surprised even today when we meet nonbelievers outside the church who demonstrate better qualities of character than many Christians in the church. Maybe you've noticed this. It can actually be a barrier to the Christian faith, as people wonder how some people who don't follow Jesus are actually better people than some people who do follow Jesus. If that's the case, what's the benefit to following Jesus? But this thinking completely misses the heart of the Christian Gospel, which is that our salvation actually has nothing to do with our goodness or lack thereof. More on that in a moment.

Instead of tossing Jonah overboard, they question him. What have you done to cause this? What is your mission? Where are you from? Who are your people? These are identity questions, and they are religiously-loaded. Commentator Tim Keller is very helpful on this point. These sailors lived in a world where everybody understood that your identity was inextricably linked to the god you worshipped. That meant that if they could figure out who Jonah was, they could figure out which god it was who was causing this storm. Then they would know how to appease this god and perhaps save their lives.¹

Though we may have forgotten this connection, it is just as true today. The core identity of every person, that which they believe gives them worth in life, is always tied to whatever it is they worship. When we worship something other than the one, true God, we are worshipping what the Bible calls an idol. Idols are simply created things, while God is the Creator of things. In those days idols were various made-up gods. In our day, idols tend to be things in our world like wealth, prestige, career, family, or health, good things which we make into ultimate things in hopes that they will deliver what only God can deliver. But whatever they are, the idols we worship will ultimately shape our identity. As Psalm 115:8 declares, "**Those who make**

¹ Timothy Keller, *Rediscovering Jonah* (Penguin Books, 2018), 44-45.

them are like them [i.e. idols]; so are all who trust in them.”²

Remember, we were created in the image of God. In Genesis 1:26 God declares, **“Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness...”** Do you see how this works? We were made to worship God, our creator. As we do, as we center our lives and our love to be focused on God, we will become like God, not divine ourselves but reflecting his life in the way we live our lives. When we turn from worshipping God to worshipping one idol or another, our identity is then rooted in that idol. We find our worth and significance, or at least try to, from that other source.

This is why it’s so crucially important that you are very clear about where it is you are seeking to find your worth in this life. If I ask you questions like the one the sailors asked Jonah, you should be able to answer those questions honestly. Who are you, really? What is the foundation of your identity? What justifies your life? What gives you worth? Can you answer those questions? If not, perhaps you need to pay better attention to how you are managing your image. What do you post on social media as a way to tell others about your life? What things are you always trying to work into conversations with others to shape how they see you? Answer these questions and you’ll have a pretty good idea what is that you are hoping will justify your life.

I’d like to say that for me it is always Christ. But it’s not. Too often I’m looking elsewhere for my worth. I see it in my choice of a profile picture. I see it in the way I steer conversations with others towards aspects of my life that I think will impress others. Some recent accomplishment of mine, or of my kids. Some important or successful person I know. Some experience I’ve had or place I’ve lived or traveled. Some new idea I came up with or lesson I’ve learned. It’s not just small talk. It’s image management. I’m probably in danger of doing it right now.

Did you notice how Jonah responds when the sailors ask him about his identity? What is the first thing he says? **“I am a Hebrew.”** That’s not the first question he was asked, about his race. It is the first answer he gives, and not by accident. Everything in this story about Jonah affirms that it is this part of his identity, his race, which is the central part of his identity, more important to him than everything else. He’s on this boat bound for Tarshish because he does not want to go to a people of another race and extend to them God’s grace. He can sleep when a storm of his causing

threatens to sink the boat and take the lives of the others on board, because those others on board are not of his race. And I’m just telling you, if you are going to look to your race to give you value in life, the only way to do so is to look down on those of a different race because if all races are of equal worth, what makes your race special? This is always how it works with idols, we end up looking sideways at others. If your identity is in your wealth, you can only justify yourself when you have more wealth than others. If your identity is in your career, you only find worth when your career is more successful than others. If it’s in your kids, you only feel good about yourself when your kids perform well, mainly better than other kids. Jonah could only have race feed his identity if he felt like his race was better than other races.

To be fair, Jonah does give a secondary answer. After mentioning his race he says, **“I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.”** That’s true, of course. As a prophet of Israel, I’m sure Jonah has spent much of his life worshipping God. I doubt he believes that there are any other gods. As he says here, he believes the Lord is the creator of all things. The problem, of course, is that the Lord is the secondary source of his identity, next to his race. And as long as these two things don’t collide, things work fine. I’ll worship you, Lord, as long as you don’t require me to compromise my racial pride, which I cannot do because then who would I be? How would I justify myself? So when the Lord commanded Jonah to go show compassion to the Ninevites, not only the people of another race, but wicked people of another race, Jonah fled from the Lord. His true god was challenged, and he could not betray his true god.

This is not uncommon. In the church today there are plenty of people who are glad to identify themselves as Christians, and many who know the Bible quite well, and whose theology is quite orthodox. But their faith and trust in Christ has not been allowed to sink deep enough into their hearts and lives to the point where they are no longer looking to anything else to ultimately inform their identity and give them worth. There is still something else that is in that primary place. This is what makes it possible for professing Christians to ultimately compromise their obedience to Christ in pursuit of wealth, or political agendas, or racial superiority, or career, or accomplishments, or even hobbies and recreation. Their identity and worth is ultimately tied somewhere besides Christ, and so if forced to choose, they choose their idol over Christ.

² This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Haven't you ever wondered how it is that people who claim to follow Jesus can continue to live lives that look nothing like Jesus? This is why. And yet, let's be careful not to let this lead us to self-righteousness, because this propensity exists in all of us. It certainly does in me. John Calvin once said, "The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual factory of idols...The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly. The mind, in this way, conceives the idol, and the hand gives it birth."³ He's not talking about somebody else. He's talking about you. He's talking about me. All of us are charmed by idols, and thus in danger of becoming like the idols we worship. All of us are then in grave danger of misdirecting our worship from the only One who can truly give us worth. Tim Keller says it better than I ever could,

Shallow Christian identities explain why professing Christians can be racists and greedy materialists, addicted to beauty and pleasure, or filled with anxiety and prone to overwork. All this comes because it is not Christ's love but the world's power, approval, comfort and control that are the real roots of our self-identity.⁴

Here is the main thing I want to say this morning. There is only one thing which can ultimately and sufficiently inform your identity and give you true and lasting worth. Lots of other things can give you the illusion for a time. But in the end they all fail because one day or another, every idol you worship will be stripped away from you. Even if you are somebody who loves God sincerely with your life, and has given yourself to obeying him faithfully, even that is not enough because there will be times when you don't love God and don't obey God. Said another way, if the most important thing about you is that you love God, if that's what you most want to be known for, what happens when you don't love God?

The only thing in this world which will ever and forever satisfy the deep thirst in the human soul for worth in this life is the love of God. That's it. Again, God made each of us in his image. That fact alone gives worth to every human being, and means every person should be afforded dignity. But our sin, our perpetual failure to reflect God as he made us to reflect him, especially in the way we love him and others, has severely damaged that image. But because God loves us even still, he came to earth himself in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, entered into humanity, took to himself all the wretched consequences of our sin, even death, and gave himself on the cross so that we might be redeemed and restored to once again reflect God's

image. God loves us at our worst just as he loves us at our best. There is nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any less. As Romans 5:8 declares, **"But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."**

Here is the most important thing about you: God loves you. And there is nothing that can change that fact. Imagine somebody coming to you like the sailors came to Jonah and wanting to know who you were. Somebody asks you, "What is it that most informs your identity? Who are you?" Imagine if this was your answer: "The most important thing about me, the thing above all else that gives my life value and meaning, is the fact that God loves me."

At first, somebody might be put off by that answer. "Oh, you think that you are so special that God loves *you*! Why does God love you? What's so unique about you? Are you saying God loves you more than God loves other people?" As I said earlier, we're programmed to always think identity is achieved by looking sideways at others. But that misses the point. The good news of the Christian gospel is not that God loves me because I'm somehow more lovable than others. No, God loves me because he is love and he can do no other. God doesn't love me because I'm an American, or because I'm a pastor, or because I may be a faithful husband and loving dad, or because I may have the "right" politics, or because I may have succeeded in my career, or because I may stand up for justice for the poor, or because I may faithfully practice my religion, or even because I love him. He loves me because he is love, which means that he loves every other person for the same reason, regardless of who they are, what they have done, where they have been, whatever.

You see, when we do love God, it is only in response to God first loving us. As John writes, **"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us..."**⁵ The only reason we are ever set free to truly love God and others in the way we were meant to love, without seeking anything in return, is because we have come to realize that this is exactly how God loves us.

The honest question we have to ask ourselves is how have we, like Jonah, kept the love of God secondary when it comes to the foundation of our identity. Don't be fooled, lots of people sitting in church every Sunday are still looking primarily elsewhere to justify their lives. Remember, Jonah declared that he worshipped

³ Cited at <http://danielwiginton.blogspot.com/2014/01/calvins-idol-factory-in-context.html>

⁴ Keller, 52

⁵ 1st John 4:7,10

God. I'm sure he did. He probably prayed all the right prayers, gave all the right offerings, recited all the right creeds, knew all the right theology. But his faith was only word-deep. In response to the sailors, he offers astute theological observations about the one, true God. But he does not obey the one, true God. And in some ways, this is a more dangerous place to be than the pagan sailors around him who claim no allegiance to God whatsoever. As C.S. Lewis once put it in *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional conversation between two devils trying to corrupt human souls, "If you can once get him to the point of thinking that 'religion is all very well up to a point,' you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us [i.e. the devil] as no religion at all - and more amusing."

Here is my prayer for you. It's my prayer for myself as well. Can each of us come to see that Jesus wants to give us this identity. You are a person made in the image of God; that fact alone gives you worth in this world. Yes, that image is severely tarnished, in you and me both. We do not reflect God as we should. In fact, it's so tarnished that we've gone seeking to justify ourselves in a thousand other places. But our true image and identity can only be recovered in Jesus. He has loved you to the fullest extent, all the way to the cross. Your sin and shortcomings have not diminished his love for you. Instead, through his sacrifice he has extended to you mercy and forgiveness. And he didn't just die *for* you, he now wants to live in you and through you. As you trust him, he is ready to grant to you the identity of God's beloved daughter, God's beloved son, one in whom he delights.

Catholic priest and author, Brennan Manning, once put it this way, "Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem as beautiful or desirable."⁶ This is meant to be the most important thing about you, that you are loved in such a beautiful way by such a beautiful God.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jonah 1:1-10 again. What stands out to you, especially from what happens in verses 7-10?
2. When these sailors find out that Jonah is the one who has brought on this storm, why do you think

they ask him so many questions? What are they trying to find out? Why not just throw him overboard?

3. Consider Jonah's answer in verse 9. How does a person declare that he worships the Lord as the creator of all things, and at the same time so deliberately disobey the Lord, even flee from the Lord's presence? How is this possible?
4. What is it in your life which you find yourself turning to besides God to give your life worth?
5. Consider what Tim Keller adds to this discussion: "Shallow Christian identities explain why professing Christians can be racists and greedy materialists, addicted to beauty and pleasure, or filled with anxiety and prone to overwork. All this comes because it is not Christ's love but the world's power, approval, comfort and control that are the real roots of our self-identity." How does this translate (or not translate) into your life at this time?
6. Do you believe that God loves you? If so, how do you know? If not, what has left you unconvinced?
7. Would you say that God's love for you is the most important thing about you? If not, what would be different about your life if it was, if your entire identity was rooted solely in the reality that God loves you unconditionally?
8. What has Jesus been saying to you through this message? How are you responding?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



*Do you know and believe that God loves you?
If so, why does God love you?*

⁶ Source unknown.