

I want to begin this morning with a tough question: who do you hate?

Okay some of us could answer that easily. You have an arch-nemesis, someone who has earned their place as your nemesis. For many of us, this is a difficult question. Because we're not talking about just disliking someone else. Some of us are on the other end of the spectrum: we're pretty agreeable people - we get along with just about everyone and don't take anything too personally. And the majority of us are somewhere between the haters and the lovers: We can think of a person (or maybe a few people) we don't like, people who've hurt us or maybe even people we're just not big fans of - we'd rather not have dinner with them. But we don't *hate* them. We ignore them as best we can, and we go about our lives.

That's not what I want to investigate with you today. I want to talk about hate. Hate can't ignore because hate is consumed with the other person. I'm sure you've heard that love is not the opposite of hate, that hate and love are actually quite close together.

It's impossible to casually hate someone. Hate is all-consuming, much like love. Hate fantasizes about the other person, much like love. Hate skews your perception of the other person, much like love.

But they're obviously not the same. Hatred comes from a wound. A hurt - real or perceived. What begins as a slight turns into a festering wound. The object of our hatred comes to consume all we do.

We don't need a bible to tell us this is toxic. Again, much like love, anyone can see what hatred does to a person... except for the person who's hating. And it's not exactly a news-flash to say that forgiveness is the remedy to hatred.

But how we forgive... that's another story. We tend to hoard forgiveness, to mete it out slowly if at all. We *will* forgive - we understand it's a virtue and all that. But people have to *earn* our forgiveness. We know the old saying "Forgive and forget" isn't wise. It isn't good, especially when someone has hurt you, or they're still in your life.

But we've taken that a step too far... we don't forgive *or* forget. At least not easily. We wouldn't call it a "miserly" forgiveness. We would say we're being safe. Protecting ourselves. Besides, they *deserve* it - they *should* seek my forgiveness.

I want to suggest today that we have forgiveness all wrong. That rather than being miserly with our forgiveness, we ought to be lavish, extravagant. We ought to seek out the smallest reason to extend forgiveness. The way we forgive ought to make other people uncomfortable.

Part of the problem is that we don't see God like that. For a lot of us, God is a grumpy old man, sitting on his heavenly porch carefully watching all us kids playing in his neighborhood, ready to shout at us to "GET OFF MY LAWN" at the slightest provocation. We see God as an uptight perfectionist who refuses to tolerate even the slightest misstep, who hates sinners with a fiery passion (literally fiery - as in hellfire). We're told God is love, but it sure doesn't seem like it - it seems more like God is an impossibly demanding parent we can never please.

We're not the first people to have this picture of God. The ancient Israelites slipped into this as well, and God sent messages to people who helped correct this false picture of God. We call these people

prophets today, and this summer, we've been working our way through the books we call the Minor Prophets. We call them minor because their books are short, but their messages are very important.

[Scripture Slide] Today we're investigating the story of Jonah - go ahead and turn there with me. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, you can find Jonah on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep this one as a gift from us.

Jonah lived in Israel during the first few decades of the 700s BC. Israel and Judah were already two separate kingdoms - they were frenemies (sort of like Judah and Edom, if you were here last week). Within a generation after Jonah's lifetime, Israel will be destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. The Israelites of Jonah's day and the generations following him *hated* Assyria. They were afraid of them, too - they represented the possibility (and later the reality) of total cultural annihilation. They were the doomsday everyone worried about, right around the corner.

The story of Jonah is a funny, surprising and even shocking story. But it doesn't make a lot of sense unless you're an expert in Ancient Near Eastern politics. And I know several of you in here fit that bill, but not *all* of us do. So we can approach reading Jonah one of two ways: I can either teach you a bunch of information about Israel and Assyria and their conflict by the time we actually get to reading the story, it'll be like a joke you had to explain: by the time we get it, it won't be funny anymore. The story will lose its emotional punch.

So I want to try something else, something I borrowed from an author named Matt Mikalatos. I want to tell you the story of Jonah as though it happened today, as though Jonah was a guy named Dove (because that's what the name Jonah means) who lives... let's say here in Beavercreek.

I asked you to open your bibles because I want you to put a bookmark in there. We'll come back at the end, but I want you to read the book of Jonah (it's only 4 chapters, less than 50 verses!) a few times this week, after I share this story with you.

But for the moment, sit back and listen to the story of a man named Dove, who God sent not to Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, but to a network of caves in Afghanistan:

### CHAPTER 1

On September 12, 2001, the word of YHWH came to Dove Mittaion: "Get up and go to Al Qaeda headquarters. Announce that I've found them guilty because of how evil they are.

Dove did get up, but instead of heading to the Middle East, he decided to get as far away from YHWH as possible. He drove to Cape Canaveral, where the space shuttle was about to head to the International Space Station. He booked passage on it, hoping space was far enough from YHWH to get him off the hook.

Once on the space station, though, everything went wrong. YHWH breathed a cosmic wind over the station. Capsules decompressed. Radiation leaks. Rogue fires. The station was falling apart, and no one could figure out why. The Chinese astronauts were begging Buddha for help. A Muslim was petitioning Allah, and a Hindu Lord Siva. Even the atheist Russian cosmonaut was praying to every god he could think of.

Meanwhile, Dove had strapped himself into a bunk and was sound asleep. The station commander went to find him. "How can you sleep at a time like this?" he shouted. "Get up and pray to your god! Maybe *he'll* listen and spare our lives."

Out of options, the crew drew straws to see who had offended the gods and was inviting this inexplicable devastation. Dove drew the short straw. "Tell us what's going on," they demanded. "Who are you, really? Who do you really work for? Are you a spy? Who is trying to destroy us?"

Dove answered, "I am an American, and I worship YHWH, the god of the universe, who created every planet, sun, galaxy and space itself."

The astronauts were terrified when they heard this, because he'd already told them he was running away from YHWH. "Why did you flee?" they demanded. And since the station was closer to total destruction at every moment, they asked "How can we make this stop? What should we do to you?"

"Toss me out the airlock," Dove said, "and the station will return to normal. I know all this calamity is my fault."

Instead, the astronauts worked harder than ever to keep the station together. But the cosmic wind was too violent. They knew they weren't going to last much longer. Finally, they wept and prayed to YHWH, Dove's god:

"Great YHWH," they pleaded, "don't destroy us for this man's sin. And don't hold his death against us. Great YHWH, you've brought this cosmic storm on him for reasons only you know!"

Then the astronauts put Dove into the airlock and evacuated him into the cold dead waste of space. The station was immediately returned to normal, the cosmic wind gone. The astronauts were awestruck by YHWH's great power. They spent the next week in prayer and fasting, promising to serve YHWH for the rest of their lives.

In the meantime, YHWH had arranged for an alien spacecraft to rescue Dove. Dove was inside the mysterious craft for three days and three nights.

## CHAPTER 2

Then Dove prayed to YHWH his God from the hold of the spacecraft:  
I didn't see another way out, so I cried out to YHWH and he answered me.  
Adrift in the icy depths of the grave, I shouted and you heard me.  
You cast me into the depths of space, into the heart of darkness,  
And death's icy fingers stole the atmosphere from my lungs.  
Though you were still there, the air was gone.

Then I said, "I have been tossed out of your sight; how could I possibly worship with your people again?"  
The cold of space leached the heat from my bones  
And the vacuum stole my breath away.  
The icy fingers of death dragged me into Hell itself.  
I drifted into that land of icy flames, its gates closing around me forever.

Yet you returned my life to me in that Abyss.  
Oh YHWH, my God!

As my life seeped out of my lungs, I remembered YHWH, and my prayer came to you on the throne of Heaven.

Those who trust their lives to idols have abandoned their vows to you, their relationship with you.

But I will worship you - I'll give you my whole life and every song will sound grateful. I've made vows, and I'm a man of my word.

The power to rescue belongs to YHWH!

Then YHWH instructed the spacecraft to leave Jonah, and it deposited him near a network of caves.

### CHAPTER 3

The word of YHWH came to Dove a second time: "Get up! Go to Al Qaeda, that fearsome organization, and announce to them the message I give you." So Dove set out to find the caves where Al Qaeda was hiding out. The cave system was extensive - it took Dove the better part of a week to explore it all. But explore the caves he did - coming across many men, women and children by the end of the first day. As he met them, he called out, "Forty days and Al Qaeda is defeated!"

The people of Al Qaeda believed Dove. They declared a fast and dressed in funeral clothes, mourning their sins. When the news reached Osama bin Laden, he rose from his command center, removed his clothes, dressed for a funeral and sat in darkness. Then he made a proclamation throughout the whole Taliban network: By the decree of bin Laden and his generals: No human being or animal, no man, woman, child, goat, mule or dog shall taste anything. They shall not eat or drink anything, even water. Dress every human in funeral clothes. Dress every *animal* in funeral clothes too. And let us all call on God with all our hearts. From this moment forward, every single person is repent from your evil paths and from the violence in your hearts.

Who knows? God may repent and change his mind. God may repent from his fierce anger, so we aren't destroyed.

When God saw what they did, how they repented from their evil habits, God changed his mind about the devastation he had said he would visit on them. And he did not do it.

### CHAPTER 4

This turn of events displeased Dove; he was furious. He prayed to YHWH, "O YHWH! Isn't this what I said while I was still in my home country? That's why I fled to space in the first place. I *knew* you are a gracious God - quick to show mercy, slow to show anger. I knew your faithful love is excessive and overflowing. That you'll find the smallest reason not to send punishment. Now, YHWH, please take my life from me. Being dead is better than living *this* world."

YHWH responded, "You're awfully morally superior. Are you sure it's *right* for you to be angry?"

Dove didn't say anything. He just stormed out of the cave system, into the desert and found a bit of shade. He decided to wait out the 40 days, to see what would happen to Al Qaeda.

YHWH God chose a bush, made it grow big and tall so it shaded Dove from the harsh sun, made his wait more comfortable. Dove was happy, grateful for the bush. But at dawn the next morning, God chose a

worm, caused it to attack the bush so it withered and died. When the sun rose, God prepared a hot, dry wind from the east and the sun beat down on Dove's head. He became faint, miserable. Dove asked if he could die again. He said, "Being dead is better than living *this* world."

But God said to Dove, "You're awfully dramatic. Are you sure it's *right* for you to be angry about the bush?" And Dove said, "Yes. Angry enough to die."

Then YHWH said, "You're so hung up on this bush, which you did nothing to find or cultivate. You certainly didn't cause it to grow. It appeared in a night and disappeared just as quickly."

"Shouldn't I be hung up on Al Qaeda, that terrible group? They represent hundreds of families, thousands of people who wouldn't know the right choice if it bit them, and who knows how many animals!?"

**END**

That's it. The story ends on a question. God says, "Shouldn't I care about all these people? Shouldn't I worry about their fate, desire their rescue? I made them, after all."

We don't know how Dove responded. It doesn't seem likely he responded well, and that's something shocking in a story full of unlikely events.

It's unlikely that Dove could've afforded to get into space (and unlikely Jonah could've afforded a ship to Tarshish, in modern-day Spain). It's unlikely every single astronaut would've instantly converted and begun praying to the Christian god (and unlikely all Jonah's sailors would've done the same).

The UFO is extremely unlikely (as was Jonah's fish that he somehow survived in for 3 days). It's almost unimaginable that Al Qaeda would've repented given how little Dove said to them (ditto for Jonah and the Ninevehites). And did you catch in there where God *changes his mind*?! God said he was going to do something and then decided not to do it! How unlikely is it that God would change his mind?

Most of us would say *very* unlikely.

Jonah is a story filled with unlikely, even impossible scenarios. And yet the most unlikely thing? That Jonah himself could possibly be so hard-headed, so stubborn, so hateful and unwilling to forgive.

Perhaps most disturbing is there at the end when we realize Jonah didn't refuse God because he's scared or worried. He knows exactly the kind of God his god is. And what kind of God is that?

"[Jonah] complained to the Lord about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. -- Jonah 4:2

Jonah says, You're the kind of God who looks for the smallest reason to forgive. You'll send punishment if you have to (haven't we seen that theme in these minor prophets?). But you're *slow* to anger. You're *quick* to mercy. You're extravagant with your forgiveness. Lavish with your love.

Is that your picture of God? Is that your picture of the people of God?

It ought to *shock* us when people who love God aren't loving themselves. We are often slow to show mercy. But we should rush to be merciful because God is quick to show mercy. We rush to anger. But we should be slow to anger because God is slow to anger. We hold grudges. But we should be in a hurry to forgive because God hurries to forgive. We should look for the smallest reason to turn from our wrath because *that's what God does*.

And that's the question before us today: will I be like Jonah, the ironically named "dove" who's not at all peaceful? Will I remain in my hate, or my schadenfreude? If God can forgive Nineveh, if God can forgive Al Qaeda, then surely I can forgive my enemies.

Do I really want to end up like Jonah, alone in a desert, bitter, spiteful, hateful, wishing I was dead rather than living in a world where my enemies come to know God?

Or could I imagine myself becoming more like God, more forgiving, more merciful, more loving? Could I imagine that the God who has rushed to forgive me can transform me into a person who is quick to forgive those who've wronged me?

Could I imagine that God could replace my anger with love? My bitterness with mercy? My wrath with forgiveness? And if you can imagine that, what's to stop you from taking the first step in that direction?

### **COMMUNION SET-UP**

[Communion Slide] Our journey begins at the Communion Table. We must begin here because we are only able to forgive because God first forgave us. We are only able to be slow to anger and quick to mercy because God has died for us.

This table remembers the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before he died. During the meal, he broke bread and gave it to them to represent their sinfulness. We take wafers to imitate that, to remember that we were sinners. We were God's enemies as surely as the Ninevehites were Jonah's enemies.

Later in the meal, Jesus gave his followers a cup of wine to represent his blood, spilled to mark a new relationship between them and God. So too, we dip our wafers in grape juice to represent the forgiveness and new life Jesus' death created for us.

By coming to this table this morning, you're acting out the forgiveness and mercy God has given you. This table is proof that God is slow to anger and quick to forgive. When we had no excuse, God created one for us by dying in our place.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive communion. This is Jesus' table, and he invites everyone to join him, to feast in the excessive, overflowing grace he offers. If you are willing to imitate God today, if you're willing to turn from your anger and embrace God's forgiveness for you AND your enemies, then you're invited to come forward.

I'm going to pray, and then as you are ready, you may come forward to Jesus' table.

### **Swedish Fish Examine**

Now that we have received Jesus' meal, we are prepared to go back into the world. We are going as agents of God's mercy, pictures of God's forgiveness. Jonah couldn't understand that. Even after three days in the smelly belly of a fish, he emerged bitter and spiteful. We are called to be different, to be a refreshing, sweet presence in the lives of those around us.

So today, you've received a Swedish fish. (I hope you like them; if not, I'll take yours!) Don't eat it yet! I want to lead you in a prayer of examine - this is an opportunity for you to consider how you will leave this place and respond to what you've heard today.

1. Who in your life is a Nineveh or Al Qaeda? Who is it hard for you to love?
2. Where will you be tempted to show them hatred this week?
3. How can you extend forgiveness and grace to them this week?