



Protecting Children:

Warning Signs of Potential Abusers

by Drew Dillingham

Everyone knows the story of the prophet Jonah. He is commanded by God to prophesy to Nineveh, home of one of Israel's greatest enemies. Despite receiving God's commission to save 120,000 people from destruction, he instead chooses to flee on a ship, is thrown overboard by its sailors and ends up in the mouth of a great fish or whale.

Many fears could have caused Jonah to flee—for example, fear of persecution from his fellow countrymen for helping an enemy or his own fear of helping a nation he despised. Some commentators also remark about his fear of undertaking such a monumental and generally undesirable task—imagine being appointed to confront your nation's greatest enemy and asking them to repent or face destruction!

Nevertheless, the threat of dying in the belly of a fish at the bottom of the sea changes Jonah's mind, and after praying for God's help, Jonah ends up on the shores of Nineveh anyway. God again commands Jonah to prophesy to the people and this time Jonah accepts. After only "a single day's walk announcing, 'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown,' the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth" (Jonah 3:4-5). Thus, the entire city was saved from destruction.

To me, this story has two central themes. First, we must always be attentive to true warning signs and be willing to react to them. Though they were sinful, the people of Nineveh recognized the sign of God's mercy and they repented, ultimately preventing the destruction of their city. Second, we cannot allow our fears to prevent us from doing what is right. Out of fear, Jonah tried to hide from his responsibilities. Thankfully God intervened, but if he had not, Jonah's fear would have led to the destruction of the Ninevites.

These two themes are why this story came to my mind as we discussed in class, this week at the Gregorian, the potential warning signs and "grooming

behaviors" of sexual offenders. Research shows there are certain behaviors, if exhibited by adults such as teachers, priests, coaches or relatives, that could be warning signs or grooming behaviors for potential child sexual abuse. Some of these behaviors include: taking personal vacations and trips with children; allowing children to often be in his/her personal living quarters; giving lavish gifts to children; violating physical boundaries with children; having countless photos of children; making sexually suggestive remarks to children; giving alcohol and/or drugs to minors; allowing children to break the rules.

In some cases, these warning signs are not reported due to fear, our own biases in favor of adults who we couldn't imagine as offenders or because of the perceived problems reporting these behaviors would create for the Church, the offender, or ourselves. The person left out of the equation in these situations is the child who could be abused.

Today, if you noticed warning signs of abuse or grooming behaviors, how would you react? Overall, as a Church and as individuals, would we behave more like Jonah or the people of Nineveh? Does it take being swallowed by a whale to respond to God's will, or despite being sinners, will we immediately recognize a devastating threat and take action in these situations before it is too late? If you notice these behaviors, it is important to keep your children away from those who exhibit them, report the individuals behaving inappropriately to your diocese, and if appropriate, to law enforcement as well. When it comes to warning signs, we must behave more like the Ninevites and less like Jonah in order to prevent abuse.

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