

Going Fishing

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Readings: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

3:1 The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying,

3:2 "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you."

3:3 So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across.

3:4 Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

3:5 And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

3:10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

Mark 1:14-20

1:14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God,

1:15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

1:16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen.

1:17 And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

1:18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

1:19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

1:20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

I met her in January of 1984, in the basement of a dorm at Yale Divinity School, where the seminarians gathered for a social time, once in a while. As time went on we would have a number of conversations, I and this new student starting seminary in the middle of the year. She told me the story of how she had left a career as a teacher, and sold her old car to a friend, in order to have the money to pay her first bills. Without the blessing of her parents she had left a secure job setting, and gone and spent several months living on Cape Cod, doing retail work, then made her way to New Haven as school began, in the middle of the Divinity school year. To others her odyssey may have seemed like a small story about a normal young adult pursuing a good idea. But to her, the moment of truth had been giving up that car to go to divinity school, not

knowing to what God was calling her next. Responding to the call of God for one young woman in her twenties meant giving up financial security, and taking a risk—even though she did not know where it was headed. She was walking away from her nets—her safety nets that is—and trying to be faithful to a voice no one else could hear. Her name was Lynn Bodden. And she has been getting me in trouble ever since.

God calls us each and every one to a journey—and it involves taking some chances, leaving the familiar, striking out in new directions. It involves leaving the fishing nets, business as usual, no matter how lucrative or comforting, and going on a new kind of fishing expedition. It wasn't just Jonah, being called to Nineveh, in the land of Assyria, the last place he wanted to go. It wasn't just Simon and Andrew, and those two sons of thunder James and John, who were called to leave their nets. It can happen to each of us, each called to a journey of wonder and grace, hurt and hope, and in the end a path of faithfulness and love. We don't know where it leads us but when the voice within calls us, it is best to listen. When Jesus says, come and follow me, it is right to just get on up and go. And surprisingly, many do.

As a church family, we are on a new chapter of our journey together. Here in the little city of Schenectady, in uncertain times, we have been given the blessing of a wonderful location from which to take this journey, following the Christ who calls us to take a chance, give up the security of the past, and try a whole new thing. Ours is not a journey of leaving location, but rather of embracing the location we have been given for ministry!

Today we undertake another annual meeting as a church. TO some that may seem unimportant. But we know it as a time when we reflect on the year just past, and take a few votes that will shape the year ahead. The past couple of years have been in between times for this church, as you bid farewell to a beloved pastor of many years, as you experimented with worship in new ways with two very fine interim pastors, as you went fishing, fishing for a new pastor! Well you reeled one in, here I be, and you have spent the past several months getting settled, learning each other, building some trust, trying to sort through what a fresh start looks like.

At a gathering in September, you shared openly your hopes, your dreams, your values, and came up with three ambitious but doable goals for the year ahead as you got started on this new phase: you decided to go to work on getting an afterschool program going; you decided to give a facelift by replacing a beloved, well worn, and well, worn-out carpet that is the path from the world to our sanctuary, and you decide to get together more often in 2015 for small community meals, to build some community and experience some grace together. All three projects are well underway. And just for good measure, the last Saturday of each month we now serve brunch for anyone in the community who wants it, free of charge, and full of love. What a great start!

And yet in a real sense all these things are but the beginning. Still just beginning is the fundamental task of going fishing for people.

I have a suspicion that when Jesus showed up with those fisher people tending their nets, they already knew who he was—and it took John the Baptist getting jailed for Jesus to know the moment was right to get the movement rolling. So he, like his predecessor John, showed up: calling people to get over themselves; get a new way of thinking; get started on a new journey to community and grace. They were about to build a movement. They were about to go out finding others who needed the same grace, who longed for the same justice and love, who were about the same kind of healing in the world, that they were, that Jesus was.

What does this have to do with us, you may ask? Well, it truly is a different time, and it truly is a different set of circumstances. But I want to propose to you that there is as much need for our journey here and now, and sharing it with others, as there was for Jesus and his first followers. The spirit's call is just as alive!

Conventional wisdom says that we live in secular times, when there is little or no interest in “mainline Christianity” any more, in the institutional church. There is some truth to that. So much truth that preachers get a little depressed sometimes. But what is clear is that we also live in times when people have a deep spiritual hunger. There are people all around us looking or something, hungry for justice, longing for a spirit, seeking some deep peace and a sense of purpose in life.

We, this congregation, located on this busy corner in this struggling city, are not simply some traditional institution. This is a church with a long legacy of being willing to take risks for the sake of Christ's love set loose in the world. Almost sixty years ago, you were willing to march down the streets of Schenectady, black and white together, for the sake of taking on racism, in the name of Christ's love. You raised your voices in protest to war, not long after. You gathered resources and housing for those with hidden disabilities, and created crisis housing for those who needed it: Mohawk Opportunities and Bethesda House. You helped start Schenectady Inner City Ministry, and in a moment of grace and vision about seventeen years ago you brought together two congregations with kindred spirits to form a new and ecumenical congregation. You declared yourself to be a congregation that was open, welcoming and affirming of all people, regardless of sexual orientation, race, or wealth- and proceeded to demonstrate that openness and welcome by bringing new families into the church not just to be part of the congregation but as leaders! Quite a journey!

So if folk are fleeing the conventional institutional church, I have news for them and for us—this ain't no conventional institution. We are, despite

being more than a century old as two communities, less than twenty years old as a new community. We are, despite having the heritage of two longstanding denominations, part of a new kind of emerging Christianity, a movement that sees faith as something alive and fresh, turns to the God who is spirit, alive and among us, welcomes questions while rejecting the pat answers of the past, and feels called to a journey of discovery. It is, to borrow the language of Elizabeth O'Connor, a journey that is both inward and outward.

Let me use the metaphor of music. Here in this little faith community, we are a group of people with broad tastes in music. You and I may well be accused of loving the old hymns. We do. And yes, we treasure the chants of holy women and men of long ago. But we are also a community that has a soul tuned to a new new song, the song of the Spirit, the song of One whose liberating love knows no bounds, a force more powerful than all the tradition, all the fear, all the dogma. And the reason we love those old hymns, and the song we hear hiding in the Gregorian chants and the arrangements of Bach, is that same song, a revolutionary melody of love breaking forth in a world desperately in need of love.

We stand today as a congregation at a crossroads. We are community made up of old and young, black white and Latino, poor and middle class and privileged, gay and straight. Coming together as we do, in this very diversity, united by Christ, we already partially represent what the new thing is that Christ is calling the world to. Some of you drive a long way to come here—this congregation matters to you. Some of you walk a shorter distance—occasionally several blocks with a walker. What this church is about plainly matters to you! Hey, I came a little distance myself to be with you. I believe in what this church stands for.

And yet, let me say again, we as a church stand at a crossroads. Because the treasure that this church is, this community is, is not something to be hoarded. The love we feel, the Spirit we sense, is something to be shared. To mix metaphors and get back to scripture, the challenge now is the same as that before the disciples of Jesus—we are being invited to go fishing. Now what does that look like? What does it take? As a community, over the next months, it will take some organizing and some mobilizing. But today I want to focus on the individual thing. For Jesus, the gospel tells us, did not start with a PR campaign or an institutional reorganization. He found some working people, found a couple friends, one by one, and two by two, and he invited them. He challenged them to come and go with him. And one by one and two by two they responded.

Now the spirit of this same Jesus is here today and inviting each of us, likewise. And I cannot tell you what the shape of your response will be or where it will lead you. But I can tell you it starts with one word. Yes. It starts with a decision to leave the same old same old, and take the risk to walk with Christ

in a whole new way. And then, let me suggest, that immediately it means being open to the possibility of turning and inviting and challenging someone you love, or I love, and sharing the movement another step, in a wider circle.

I believe that God is calling this community of faith to a whole new adventure. Together we can say yes, or no, or maybe. Before we get done, let's be real, we will probably do all three. I mean, we all hesitate, disagree and have to work things through! But I pray the first word and the last word will be yes. Together in community and for each of us one by one and two by two, I pray the word will be yes.