

St. Paul's Congregational Church  
Jonah 3: 1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-20 – Epiphany3B  
January 21, 2018  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

At a recent gathering of Bread for the Journey, one of the women from Integrity broke down sobbing as she told her story – she said over and over again, “I can’t believe I did this to myself. I can’t believe how I let it get to this point. How could I have been so stupid to end up like this – I’m so ashamed. I feel so guilty – I’ve lost my children, my family, any dreams I ever had. How could I have done this!”

At the same time, another woman sitting on the couch, her arms folded, her lips set, whispered something to her neighbor, a smile on her face. I asked what the smile was about – and she launched. She was so terribly angry – not at this woman – but the first woman’s story touched her in a way that a burning anger lying not far beneath the surface, exploded. Emotions were unbelievably high in that room.

A vast majority of the women gathered on Thursday had been at Integrity less than 30 days – they’d come to Integrity from prison, from drug court, a few were self admits – they were all struggling deeply – wanting, needing, to know forgiveness, some hope in their tortured lives. Then another woman spoke up - you know, I’ve had all those feelings too – but I’ve come to a place in my recovery where I’m determined to help others through their own struggle: to help others find the strength for their own journey, that others may know that there is hope, that there is the possibility of new life for all of us.

We kept talking about the need to surrender – to let the past go – not giving in, but a giving over - to not worry about the future – to see today as the “present”, a gift God has given to each one of us. To give our lives over to a higher power – the name of that higher power for most of the women is God. And to receive the freedom of new life that surrender brings. I must tell you – this was one of the most intense sessions of Bread for the Journey that I’ve ever experienced. Certainly one of the most raw, honest, hopeful times I’ve had with these wonderful women. And what a message we all need to hear!

Surrender is a tough concept for us, isn’t it. We pride ourselves on our accomplishments, crossing stuff off our “to do” lists, we make plans and sometimes stubbornly do everything and anything to make them happen, in spite of signs around us that maybe it’s not the best thing for us to concentrate on. It’s hard to let that go, isn’t it. All this brings another question – what is it that we surrender to?

Couldn’t help but think about the Jonah story in this context. We all remember that story from our childhood – we were fascinated by the science fiction aspect of a whale swallowing a man, but we’ve come to realize that’s only a small piece of the action of the story. The bigger picture: God calls his reluctant prophet Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the people they shall be destroyed unless they turn away from their wickedness. No way, not me, says Jonah – and he runs away, to escape, to try to hide from God. He gets on a ship to take him away but a great storm comes and while Jonah

sleeps, the sailors try to stabilize the ship. They can't – they come to wake Jonah – they tell him to call on his God to save them. Jonah tells them that he's trying to run away from God and of course, the sailors become even more afraid. Jonah tells them to throw him overboard – the sea will calm, he says. It's because of me and what I'm doing that the storm rages. The sailors try to bring the ship back to land instead of doing what Jonah asks, but they can't. So they pick him up, throw him overboard, and indeed the storm calms.

The Lord then sends a great fish to swallow Jonah – he was in the belly of the fish for 3 days and 3 nights. Then after Jonah prayed, the whale spewed Jonah out to the dry land.

The next part of the story is our text for today – the account of the Lord coming to Jonah a second time and Nineveh's repentance. The problem is, though, that Jonah still didn't agree with God's plan of forgiveness for these people: he thought the Ninevites deserved the calamity God threatened to send on them. So Jonah was angry – he goes off to sit under a tree, probably sitting there pouting. There's plenty of shade to protect him from the blazing sun – all seems well. But then overnight the plant dies and he is even more angry when his shelter from the sun is taken away. But the bottom line is this: he did ultimately go to Nineveh and warn the people of impending doom – even though he didn't agree with what God was doing. Isn't that surrender?

Jonah is different from the other prophets we meet in the Old Testament, isn't he. Instead of willingly responding to God's command without question, he turns around and runs as fast as he can the other way! And then, when he finally does respond, he does it grudgingly and complains the whole time. Not our image of a prophet, a man of God – that's for sure. But is he ever human. Maybe we're more like Jonah than we care to admit. Surrender – surrender to God's will – but not without a fight.

As with every other story in the Bible, though, this one is about God – who God is, what God does, and the lengths God will go to bring us back into relationship, even reluctant, stubborn prophets like Jonah. Even reluctant, stubborn folks just like us.

Jonah tries to escape from God, tries to break off his relationship with God – but he can't. Whether in the depths of the sea, in the belly of a whale, or in the city of Nineveh, Jonah never succeeds in running away from God. And neither can we. No matter how hard we try to turn away, ignore, hide, disregard, even run away, God will keep calling us. God is so very persistent. God calls us to surrender.

Then the gospel lesson this morning: that wonderful story of the calling of the disciples – men who did not run away. There are Simon and Andrew hard at work as fisherman – Jesus comes along, tells them to follow him – no question for Simon and Andrew - immediately, immediately they followed Jesus. Left everything and followed Jesus. And the same thing happened with James and John – they're working too mending their nets – immediately Jesus called them and they too left everything – their family, their livelihood, and followed him. Talk about surrender!

Some difference between these first disciples and Jonah, isn't there – Jonah's immediate response – no way! Not because he was too busy, not because he had a job he couldn't imagine leaving – but because he doesn't agree with God's ways and God's agenda. Jonah sees others who are disobedient, evil around him, and believes that these should be punished! After all it's what they deserve. The evil should be punished and the righteousness rewarded. Bad things should happen to bad people. Good things

should happen to good people. Everybody Jonah knew saw the world in the same way – and if we’re honest, sometimes we do too. Until God calls us out of our comfort zones and opens our eyes.

So what does this mean to all of us?

First is the reality that God is calling us – each of us. All of us!

Today we have Jonah who fussed and fumed the whole time God was reaching out to him, but in spite of this, he ultimately did what God asked – but not without a fight. And we have Simon and Andrew and James and John who willingly dropped everything to follow. And look at the people around us: the women of Integrity who are in the fight of their lives and who know the necessity of surrender to the call of their higher power, God, to receive the freedom of new life. Out of their former comfort zones. Hard as it is to believe, their lives of addiction were a type of comfort zone – familiar, predictable. Just as our lives are familiar and predictable. But something is missing.

God calls each one of us into relationship, into new life; out of our comfort zones. God calls us to take our part in bringing in God’s realm – ordinary people like us! Do we realize that we’re worthy to respond? That each of us has gifts and talents that God can use to make this a better world, one step at a time? Makes me think that there’s no such thing as “ordinary” – every one of us is extraordinary – simply because we’re all created in God’s image and that’s good! Imagine what a difference that would make in our relationships with our God and each other as we truly live that out.

When we truly hear God’s call, when we decide to follow, we too are called to lay down, surrender, our most valuable possessions: and those possessions are not just material “stuff”. We’re called to set aside our understanding of the world, our view of right and wrong: that’s perhaps the toughest battle those Integrity women have to face. Surrendering all their assumptions and opening themselves up to the possibility of new life, a new healthy life, is hard! Getting past the guilt and shame, seeking and receiving forgiveness, and maybe the hardest task of forgiving themselves – giving up their ways and their thoughts – but the battle is worth it as they come to realize that they are valuable human beings, precious in God’s sight.

What must we surrender – what understandings of the world do we have to set aside – what assumptions must we challenge, what possessions must we lay down – for us to hear and respond to God’s call? And what joy will we know when that happens! But we have to let go first.

Jesus calls to each and every one of us, “Follow me.” And Jesus is relentless. Jesus won’t quit – in spite of our hesitation, our assumptions, our stubbornness. What a wonderful realm it is that takes form through the call of ordinary people, extraordinary people like us! Jesus doesn’t work alone – never has – never will – he joins hands with ordinary people to do some extraordinary things, often in unexpected times and places.

William Willimon tells a story of one night, some years ago when he was invited by a fraternity at Duke University to give a talk. The dean requires the fraternities to have a certain number of these sessions each year – Willimon says, in order to give the fraternities some semblance of respectability. His assigned topic was “Character and College” – he thought, I can’t believe an old guy like me is about to talk to young guys like them on character.

Well, he went to their fraternity house and knocked on the door. It opened and he was greeted by a young boy of about 9 or 10. He couldn’t help but think, what is a kid

doing over here at this time of night? Surely there are rules against young children in a fraternity house this late.

The boy said to Willimon, “They’re waiting in the common room. Follow me and I’ll take you there.” Willimon tells, “We wound our way back into the common room and the fraternity was gathered, glumly waiting for my presentation. As I began my remarks, he says, I noticed that the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the brothers. Shortly, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.

Willimon continues, “I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk I asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So I thanked them for the honor and made my way out. I heard the college kid say to the little boy, “You go on and get ready for bed. I’ll be up to tuck you in and read you a story.”

Willimon continues, “When we stood just outside the door, the fraternity boy lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out. “Let me ask you, Willimon said, “Who was the kid there tonight?”

“Oh, that’s Darrell,” the fraternity boy said. “This fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrell that way. His mom’s on crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can’t care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it’s okay to go home. We take him to school, buy him his clothes, books, and stuff.”

Willimon said, “That’s amazing. I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible.”

The boy looked at Willimon and said as he took another drag on his cigarette, “I tell you what’s amazing. What’s amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else.”

Friends, what’s amazing is that God would pick people like us to do something this good for somebody else. We have lots of mentors on this journey – the women of Integrity, Jonah, Samuel, Peter, James, Andrew, John, that fraternity boy in North Carolina, family members, friends, members of this very congregation. And each of us are mentors to all those we meet in our daily living. What are they learning from us?

An expression I’ve heard often from the women of Integrity is this: let go and let God.

What do each of us have to let go of, to surrender, to let God lead us into new life? Let’s support each other as we continue that journey together. Amen

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we are in worship today because you have called us, invited us, and summoned us here. We are here, not because we searched for you, but rather because you searched for us, found us, claimed us, and gave us jobs to do in your realm.

Sometimes we are amazed by your faith in us. There are times too when we think that we do not have the gifts or abilities to do what you expect of us.

Yet, you have called us. Help us to have as much faith in ourselves as you have in us. Give us what we need to do your work. This we ask, for the sake of your realm and because we worship today because of you. Open our eyes, open our ears, most of all, open our hearts and help us to love you more. Amen.