

Jonah 3: 1-5, 10
Mark 1: 14: 20
January 25, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

This morning we heard “the word of the Lord came to Jonah *a second time*. Go up to Nineveh that great city, and proclaim to it the message I tell you.” Jonah goes. Now if you are not familiar with the story of Jonah you may well wonder, “What happened the *first time*?” Well, as many of you know, the first time God told Jonah to go to Nineveh he ran away. He took a boat that would take him far away from these scary commands. Jonah is under the impression that his God is, like all the gods of the time, geographically challenged. Jonah wants to go to the jurisdiction of a less demanding deity. But Jonah’s God is not limited by human made borders of nations or tribes. God shakes up the sea until Jonah admits that the long arm of God can reach anywhere. He persuades the sailors to throw him into the sea whereupon the seas calm and he is swallowed by a big fish. During a three day residence in the interior of the fish Jonah surprisingly discovers that God is faithful even in that disgusting environment. He sings a song of grateful praise. After three days he is literally vomited up by the fish back where he started and not long after Jonah receives the second call.

Suppose the disciples who are called by Jesus by the Sea of Galilee are Jonah’s? Suppose this is their second go-round on the call circuit? Every generation wrestles with the immediate and unquestioning response to this man’s words, “Follow me.” Every generation supposes that Simon and Andrew, James and John must have known Jesus beforehand and that they had some basis already to trust him enough to drop their fishing nets to follow Jesus. It certainly is possible. Capernaum was not a big town; although being on the main trade route between

Egypt and the northern part of the Roman Empire there was a great deal of traffic. No doubt the odd religious charismatic showed up from time to time inviting followers.

Yet others in every generation imagine a childlike trust—an inner response to Jesus which was not dependent on prior knowledge—expressed so beautifully by John Greenleaf

Whittier:

In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian Sea
the gracious calling of the Lord;
let us, like them, without a word,
rise up and follow Thee.

Yet what if there is a third scenario? What if this is the *second time* Jesus has come by? What if the first time Jesus said, “Follow me” the fishermen took one look at him and burst out laughing? What if they, in the sometimes coarse words of hard working folk told him to stop wandering around with his heavenly ideas and get a real job? What if they felt some stirring inside which was disturbing and thought that if they ignored him and the feeling he raised in them, he would go away and not come back?

I like this scenario because it allows for a basic reality to most human responses to the call of Jesus or to most new situations: resistance; or to quote my two year granddaughter, “NO!” When a two year old gives this one word ultimatum, we may call her “strong willed” or rebellious. Yet we must also recognize that this defiance represents an important and healthy stage of development. She is experiencing herself as an individual in her own right. She is exercising her ability to make choices. The declaration of “no” says, I am a person with a right to make my own way in the world. The word “no” creates space for her to size up whether she

wants to obey a parental directive or not. This explains why, when asked if she wants to go with mommy to the store she will say, “No” and then take mommy’s hand to be put in the car seat.

To me the ability to say no is essential for two reasons. It creates a boundary for others to respect. It helps us to define who we are in relationship to others. We are defined as much by what we say “no” to as to what we say “yes.” It is the ability to say, “No” which creates the inner space for us to develop our own sense of purpose and our interests in life.

Which brings me to the second value of being able to say “no”: it allows us to say “yes” and mean it. It is the ability to value who we are and how we spend our time that allows us to respond sincerely when there is an invitation to commit ourselves to some task or activity. People who say “yes” every time they are asked to do something quickly become tired, resentful and feel that they have no time to themselves. Sadly, behind many people continue to say “yes” even when they don’t want to because the fear that they won’t be liked or accepted if they say no. Yet what joy there is when, having said no on numerous occasions we receive an invitation to serve in some way and say, “Yes! I want to do that!”

So maybe the disciples weren’t like Jonah in a dramatic way. There were no terrible consequences. They experience the equivalent of spending three days sloshing around in the guts of a big fish—if there is an equivalent. Maybe the first time Jesus came by and invited them to follow they said “no” in one form or another. But in the invitation a seed was planted, an idea was born. Maybe they found themselves paying closer attention to Jesus when he spoke, watched his way with people, reflected on his teaching and how he cared for people. Maybe, just maybe they began to yearn for a life that held more than fishing every day—that there was meaning in life far beyond daily routine. So that, on this occasion when Jesus

stopped, looked them in the eye and said, "Follow me and together we will fish for people"

something was different this time. They followed. Amen.