

Turn and Fish for People
Good Shepherd, Burke
Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 21, 2018
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Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Psalm 62: 6-14

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1: 14-20

Proclaiming the good news is a risky endeavor.

The night before Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he gave a speech in Memphis called the mountaintop speech. In the speech, he mentions death threats; but he's determined not to let fear stop civil rights work. He retells the story of the Good Samaritan in light of the sanitation worker strike. He considers the two men in the parable, including a priest, who walked by the man who was hurt. King notes, "Of course they were afraid!" But what allows the Samaritan to overcome *his* fear (and perhaps disgust) is his ability to *turn* the question around. For the Samaritan, "The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" The question for him is, "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to *him*?"

You can substitute any group or person in that turned-around question. If I do not stop to help the DACA immigrants, what will happen to them? If we do not find shelter for the homeless on a frigid single digit night, what will happen to them? If we do not address those suffering from the opioid epidemic what will happen to them? But turning the question alone will not solve these problems. If our hearts are not turned so that we can act, nothing will happen.

The Old Testament prophet Jonah has no interest in turning either the question or his heart. Last summer the children at Good Shepherd music camp made us laugh with their musical retelling of this grumpy prophet. I'm guessing Jonah has been a prophet for awhile. Perhaps early on, Jonah, like the disciples in today's gospel, felt the excitement and immediacy of a new call. But now, it seems Jonah has been working in the service of the Lord long enough to grow jaded. He does not just suffer from compassion fatigue. Jonah is sick of being triangled between God and people. Jonah has responsibility but no ultimate authority to make the final call. The people God wants to send Jonah to are worthless and selfish. They don't appreciate Jonah or God. They do whatever they want and do not deserve God's attention or compassion.

So when the word of the Lord comes to Jonah the *first* time, Jonah turns and runs in the exact *opposite* direction to Tarshish. He flees as far away from God, God's call, and the people of Nineveh as possible. The people of Nineveh are godless Assyrians. Jonah despises them as much as any group today reviles another. Jonah's proclaiming the good news of God's love to Nineveh is like a discouraged unemployed worker in coal country proclaiming good news and compassion to the elite in Silicon Valley. It's like inner city immigrants proclaiming God's good news and steadfast love to those in fly-over country who wish them good riddance. Or it's like the Palestinians proclaiming peace and love to the Israelis.

Jonah so resists the thought of God's saving the undeserving people of Nineveh that he cannot rest until he boards the ship to Tarshish. There, completely at peace with his decision, he falls asleep in the hold. He's oblivious to a storm God whips up until the captain shakes him awake and says, "Get up and pray or something! Who are you? What do you do for a living?" Jonah explains he's God's servant running away from a call and suggests they dump him overboard. Reluctantly, they do so and the storm ceases. God sends a large fish to swallow Jonah and saves him from drowning.

So Jonah, who refused to fish for people, finds himself in the belly of a fish praying for God's help. Jonah, who refused to proclaim good news to those who turn away from God, finds himself, having turned away from God, turning back to pray for God's saving mercy. And God, merciful as always, gives Jonah a second chance.

The story picks up in our passage for today. The Word of the Lord comes to Jonah a *second* time. "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Jonah gives up and goes. He doesn't even go all the way into the city, but shuffles only about a third of the way in. He cries a mere 8 words, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown." If Jonah could have spat on the ground, he would have. How he wishes his words would come true! But to his dismay, the people believe God and turn around. Not just their words. But their hearts. And God, so moved by their turning from their evil ways, changes his mind about what Jonah said would happen in 40 days. And God does not do it.

Jonah is all fire and fury. He's mad as a hornet. He finds a bush, sits under it, and pouts. But God does not leave Jonah alone. He fishes for him just as he fished for the people of Nineveh. God appoints a worm to attack the bush and make it wither. Jonah declares he no longer wants to live. God asks him, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" Jonah replies, "Yes. Angry enough to die." The Lord turns the question around: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow...should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons...and also many animals?"

The book ends with God's question. He has the last word. And He has the last word with us. He turns around the questions we have, concerned about ourselves, to make us consider his concerns for the world. He calls each of us to get up and go, sometimes to the very people we despise or consider undeserving, and fish for them. We are to see them as *he* sees them. Of infinite value. Worthy of great effort and expense. Worth saving and helping. In calling us to proclaim the good news in concrete ways to others in need, God intends not only to reach the people we serve. In our very act of fishing for people, God intends to turn *our* hearts around to receive his love.

Jesus himself models what it means to fish for people. He drives out unclean spirits, cures the sick, casts out demons, prays, and chooses to make lepers clean. He risks displeasing those with power. He jeopardizes his own ministry. Our question as *his* disciples is not, "If I stop to help, what will happen to me?" But "If I don't, what will happen to *them*?" Fishing for people turns around not only the way we see God's world, but also turns our hearts to experience fully God's saving love.

So today after the service, we will get up and go out into the world. Let's toss overboard debates about giving a man a fish or teaching him to fish. Instead, let's turn toward the One who has turned toward us...and let Jesus turn us into fishers of people. Amen.