

God's Invitations

Mark 1:14-20

January 25, 2009

I.

The Old Testament reading today told us part of the story of Jonah. And if you look at your bulletin inserts, you can see that it begins by saying "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time." A second time? What about the first time? What happened with that? The first part of the story probably is more familiar to us. And so I want to go back and review the story of Jonah with you in order to set the stage for today's Gospel from Mark.

The Book of Jonah begins when the Lord told Jonah to go the great city of Nineveh and prophesy that the city would be destroyed because of the wickedness of the people. And as background information, Nineveh at this time was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and a few decades later the Assyrians conquered the northern Kingdom of Israel and sent its people into exile.

But back to Jonah. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh. Jonah, however, did not want to do that, so he went down to the docks and boarded a ship going in the opposite direction. And God then brought a great storm on the sea, and to make a long story short, Jonah went overboard and was swallowed by a big fish. Some traditions describe it as a whale. While he was in the belly of the fish Jonah prayed and repented, and three days later the fish deposited Jonah on dry land.

Imagine you saw a headline that said "Man Swallowed by Whale for Three Days, Spit Back Out!" Where might you see that? It probably would be in one of those newspapers in the grocery store check-out line. We wouldn't take that very seriously, would we. But yet, it is part of the story of Jonah and it's in the Bible to teach about obedience to God.

And only after all this, do we get to the second part of the story, which is contained in today's Old Testament reading. The Lord spoke to Jonah a second time, and this time Jonah went to the city of Nineveh and did what the Lord wanted him to do. He learned the hard way that he could not run from God's call to do his work.

II.

Against this background, Mark's Gospel told us about the calling of Andrew and Peter, and James and John, to be Jesus' disciples. And they did not hesitate even for a moment. They dropped everything and went immediately. Jesus said "Follow me," and they followed. They did not even ask where he was going, or how long they would be gone.

And to some extent this might have been because they already knew something about Jesus, and were aware of the message he had been preaching as he began his ministry. It all began in a small geographic region, and news probably traveled fast. Jesus didn't just drop out of the sky that day. These additional details are in the Gospels of Luke (5:8-11) and John (1:29-42).

Even so, it is a remarkable story. These four men were not looking for something else to do. They were busy with their fishing businesses. They already had futures before them. According to tradition, Peter and Andrew owned several fishing boats. And James and John were part of a family fishing business that had hired men working for them.

But yet, they responded to Jesus' call. They did not run away as Jonah did. They did not say they weren't ready. They simply were called and they answered. They chose to follow Jesus in the greatest story, the greatest adventure, there ever was.

That adventure continues today, and two important parts of it apply to us. The first is that the calling of the disciples was the beginning of the messianic community, which now is the church

in the world. The second is how the story of Andrew, Peter, and the others is a model for our own lives as we live and worship in that church.

And as we look at each, we can see there is both bad news and good news. The bad news is that parts of the church, as an organization, have forgotten the Gospel. The good news is that the church, as a community of people, still can live the Gospel. Ideally the organization and community would be the same. Unfortunately, they are not. Let's start with the bad news first.

III.

We know there are people out there who consider themselves good Christians, but who regard the church as "organized religion" in a negative sense. They have watched us, and by "us" I don't mean St. Thomas but rather the larger church. And in several ways we, as the larger church, have not presented ourselves well.

When we think about some of the public images of the larger church as being contentious, deviant, intolerant, selfish, and greedy, it's not hard to see why some faithful people would not want to be part of that kind of church. Some of the things we see on TV and read in the newspapers don't seem very Christ-like. It's another example of how publicity generated by a small minority can create a bad impression that affects everyone.

But it doesn't have to be that way. That's the good news. The church is here as the Body of Christ that he left behind. We are part of that body, and we now are his hands and his feet to do his work. We still are able to continue his teachings and faithfully proclaim the Gospel notwithstanding those in the church who have their own agendas.

And remember that the enemy is at work. But he knows he cannot destroy the church. So he tries to weaken it by leading us to treat it as a secular organization rather than an instrument of God. Satan wants us to focus on budgets, numbers, and committees, and to forget about prayer, worship, and evangelism. He wants us to argue with each other, not love each other.

And the enemy will fail if we remember why Jesus called the disciples and why they followed. They weren't starting a business, they were forming a community that would love and share with each other as God's kingdom came closer. And because of Jesus the people in that community would live on with God in eternity when their work on earth was done.

In a way, when we consider the significance of salvation in the next world, and the blessings that Christian lives offer in this world, we almost wonder why Christian discipleship shouldn't be a no-brainer. Why isn't the world beating our doors down to get in and become Christians?

Well, one reason is that people just don't know who we are and what we can mean in their lives. That's our responsibility. We probably could do a better job of telling them. But we might hesitate because it could appear that telling people about the church simply is not necessary.

We might assume that today everyone knows about Christianity, and they will come to us if they are interested. After all, the church has been around for centuries, and people can find out whatever they want from books, TV, newspapers, and the internet. Because instant knowledge is available perhaps it's easy to assume that everyone has all the facts they need, and can make their own choices.

But that isn't true. And it's part of the problem I described earlier about putting our worst foot forward. Many people simply don't have the facts, or what they think are the facts are not the facts. Their understandings can be incomplete, misleading, or wrong.

As a digression, this "instant" aspect of our society reminds me of a story about Yakov Smirnoff, a Russian comedian who came to America and did some funny routines during the 1980s and

90s. In several of these routines he marveled about American consumer products that did not exist in Russia at the time, and then ended with the exclamation, "What a country!"

I remember on one of his shows he said "On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk. You just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice. You just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, what a country!"

Wouldn't it be great if bringing people into the church was that easy? Just add water and create members. Obviously, it takes more than that. But even though we believe that bringing people into the church sometimes is difficult, it also isn't so hard. And today's Gospel shows that to us.

When Jesus called the disciples he knew they did not understand the meaning of his message when they started. And they did not know they eventually would go into the world, bring people to faith, and spread Jesus' teachings as the foundation on which the church would be built. Jesus did not have to explain all the details in advance.

IV.

And I would suggest that is a good model for us. One of our responsibilities to the church is to help it grow, and to do so for the right reasons. It is not just about numbers. We want to bring people to faith in Christ and share in our worship. After that, all else will follow.

And today's Gospel tells us we don't need clever arguments or broad theological knowledge. And we don't have to have all the answers to all of the questions that might come up. All Jesus said was "follow me." He knew that experiencing faith is better than merely having it explained.

That applies to us. We don't have to sweat the small stuff. Just invite people to come and see what we do. The church is there to help us. And here I mean the church in the good sense, the church that consists of the overwhelming number of good and faithful Christians who are not part of the sensational stories that seem to grab the headlines.

Bringing people into the church is something that we do through the church. We invite people to come and see. We invite them to experience all we have here at St. Thomas. And all we have to explain is what the church means to us.

But even though it isn't hard, it also does not come naturally. We have to think about it and be intentional. At times God asks us to do things we would not do on our own.

V.

This means that we must be more than just involved in discipleship. We also must be committed. And what is the difference here between involvement and commitment? Well, last week at our mens' breakfast we enjoyed some tasty eggs and sausage. Eggs and sausage describe the difference. The chicken was involved, but the pig was committed.

We are called to be committed, and we cannot just be involved for a while and then walk away. Many of you probably have seen the TV commercial that tells us how easy it is to ask about their product. They say it's so easy a caveman could do it.

Well, without getting into the capabilities of cavemen, we know that worldly things can distract us from talking to others about spiritual things. And we probably would agree that there are things we might rather do than get other people involved with St. Thomas. But it also is not rocket science. It isn't that hard. Just invite them to come and see. After all, it's God's invitation. Invite them, and the church and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. Come and see. *Amen.*