

Reflection - Jan 25, 2015
Bethany-Newton United Church
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I think the story of Jonah may be the world's first recorded "big fish story"! I can't imagine what Jonah's friends thought of him when he explained to them that instead of catching a fish he was caught by a fish! This story is definitely a good example of how God has a sense of humour. However as any good comedian does, God uses humour to speak of truth in a way that is both amusing and memorable.

Jonah is an interesting guy. He seems to like to go to extremes when responding to situations. Most people if God told them to go to Nineveh might just simply ignore God's voice. Pretend it didn't happen, go to work the next day and forget all about religion and call. In fact, that is what most of us do. Jonah however seems to take God's call so seriously that he flees in the opposite direction! The story does not say why Jonah chooses to go to Tarshish or what might be waiting for him when he gets there. Jonah doesn't get very far when God decided to intervene on his little trip. A storm rises up and eventually Jonah admits that it is his fault and over he goes. This should be the end of the story but it isn't. Instead of drowning like most people would assume Jonah gets swallowed by a fish! He lives miraculously in

the fish for three days and afterwards get vomited back up on shore and God gives him a second chance to go the right direction.

My own story reflects Jonah's in many ways. I first felt called by God over ten years ago when I was still an undergraduate student at UBC. I however was not bold enough to become a candidate for ministry right after graduation even though I was thinking about it. Fears I had were in relation to wondering if I had the strength and faith to commit to a life of service to others. Would I have to give up my personal dreams and aspiration? Would I have to sacrifice a life of wealth and comfort? Was I willing to do this? These are important questions that I had to find answers to.

I spent about 6 years working in various jobs and always contemplating going back to school but always coming up with new excuses. How am I going to afford this? Working for the church is not a reliable income... If I am already in debt how am I going to be able to go back to school with no money? These are all legitimate questions but I was using them as an excuse not to step out in faith.

In 2009, I had the opportunity to travel to Israel. Much of that experience was similar to most journeys as a tourist. I learned about the customs and culture of Israelis and Palestinians, took lots of pictures, ate new foods and learned that in Israel they don't serve dairy and meat in the same restaurant. However, I had one experience that I would describe as a religious experience, an epiphany so to speak. When we visited Capernaum, one of the towns that Jesus lived in, the rest of my party got stuck in the church because they were about to start to celebrate mass and they got locked in by some well meaning but inconvenient nuns. I was alone and went down to the shore of Galilee. This was the exact location where today's gospel story occurred and it is one of the few places in Israel where you can be without a doubt sure that the historical Jesus stood.

[break for slides]

I don't often hear God specifically calling but standing where Jesus' first disciples left their boats and nets on the shore and followed Jesus gave me a strong feeling that I also needed to make that step of faith. Peter, James and John left their careers and homes behind to follow Jesus because they were convinced that they could make a difference with Jesus. I knew that so could I. It was at this moment, in this place deeply connected to

the story of Jesus and the Gospel that I decided I would no longer make excuses for not following Jesus.

When I got back home I started to fill out an application to attend the Vancouver School of Theology. VST is one of the schools that trains men and women to serve God in the United Church. We also have students from the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches and a few from other denominations as well, even some who would not identify as Christian. VST's call is both to equipping leaders in the church and outside of the church. The school is also committed to inter religious dialogue and they offer a degree in Indigenous and Inter-religious Studies.

In short, there are many ways you can answer a call to serve and working in the church is only one of the ways. An education is not necessary to serve but it helps to prepare you to serve and also acts as a method of further discernment.

Another event that was helpful to my discernment was a retreat that was held by BC Conference for those feeling called to ministry in the United Church. We gathered at Bethlehem Retreat Centre in Nanaimo in June 2012 where people who felt a call from God from all over BC gathered and worshipped together and had conversations about what their passions were and what that might

look like in the future and how they could partner with ministries in the United Church. Some like myself continued on to be interviewed by the Candidacy and Admissions Board of BC Conference and some returned to their home churches with a better understanding of their own call in the communities where they were living.

This leads into what I am going to call the "theology" part of the sermon. After all it is Theology Sunday and we can't really call it that without doing a bit of theology together. The question I propose is what are the essentials for a theology of "call". In other words, what beliefs do we have as the church that support this idea of being called from where we presently are into another place by God. Both Jonah and Jesus' disciples were called by God from one place to another. But why?

For me, call is an extension of grace. Grace is a gift given to us by God because God loves us. We may spend out whole lives running from God, not wanting anything to do with Jesus, but God's position is always the same, we are loved. It does not matter how much we have screwed up or how much we have contributed to injustice in our world, God's love for us never changes, it is always a wide open invitation into relationship with our creator.

But there is also an invitation to respond to this gift of grace. Jesus says that to whom much is given, much is asked in return. But don't think of grace as a debt we all need to repay. Grace means that our debt is already paid and we live in the freedom of Christ Jesus. Call is an invitation for us to combine who we are created to be with the vision God has for our world.

I am going to be bold today in saying that this invitation applies to us all. I feel the story of Jesus in the gospels does not leave much room for someone who believes in Jesus and has no call. Even if this call is as simple as being more intentional about the relationships in your life, investing in quality time with your family, or serving those in need around you in your daily life there is always something that you can do to partner with what God is doing in the world around you. Each and every one of us has a call from God and a wide open invitation to follow Jesus in that call being filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit our helper. I hope you will be open to what God can do through you: in your life, the lives you are in relationship with and the lives touched by our congregation Bethany-Newton United Church. Even if we can each make one small step closer to our combined goal we will each make one small step individually but as a group we will look back and see how far one small step from each of us can take the

whole. Just please do not run away in the opposite direction from God because I cannot guarantee what might happen to you if you do!

Next we are going to sing a beautiful Latin American song that invites us to answer the call of Jesus on the lakeshore to come and follow Him. Your experience may not be as literal as mine was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee but I know that if you invite God to speak He will answer. During the hymn I invite you to pray and ask God what it is that you may be being called to and also to pray for the courage to follow Jesus and not be afraid. After all, we are not alone, we live in God's world, Thanks be to God! Amen.