

3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

Discipleship requires a certain amount of flexibility. Actually, a better term would be acrobatics. I'm thinking of something along the lines of what the performance group Cirque du Soleil does. Discipleship is easier when you have no bones to break in the process.

But for those of us who are not yet filleted, there's still hope. Discipleship demands the prerequisite of conversion, and the only part of us that must be broken in conversion is our hearts. Broken open by the bracing impact of God's word; broken painfully by the suffering world and the urgent cry of the poor; broken humbly with contrition at the occasion of our own sin; broken again and again so that this small vessel of our love can be widened, broadened, made more glorious in the same way the snake leaves its skin and the butterfly its chrysalis. The work of conversion in our lives demands a holy U-turn on the road we've been taking up to now. And not just one hour of turning but a regular reassessment of the direction we're headed. Because human nature is notorious for steering us in the direction of self-involvement. Unless we engage in a routine of prayerful reflection and self-examination, we can count on gently sliding back into a self-satisfying lane.

Jonah's story is very instructive, not to mention wildly entertaining, because we all find ourselves in Jonah's boat. It's going to Tarshish, by the way, and the Lord has specifically asked Jonah to go to Nineveh in the opposite direction. God asked him to go northeast and Jonah responded by turning southwest. Before long, as we know, Jonah is really going to go south—right to the bottom of the sea in the belly of a fish.

Centuries later, the symbol of the fish will be used for Christ's disciples, and that has a note of hilarity in it. Next time you see a fish on the back of someone's car, or your own, remember that the fish in Jonah's story was a better disciple of the Lord than Jonah was. The fish did God's bidding: swallowed up God's refusenik servant, held onto him undigested for three days, and then spat him out on the appropriate shore. The story of Jonah is outrageous and it makes us laugh and it's supposed to. But some of that laughter had better be rueful, and some of that absurdity had better be recognizable. It's our story. Sometimes God has to go to biblically outrageous lengths to get our attention.

Having been bamboozled into making a U-turn himself, Jonah does not extend the favor to the citizens of Nineveh to whom he has been delivered. Jonah does not preach conversion or repentance or anything of the sort. He proclaims a message of annihilation from which there is no escape. We can see that although the prophet has been vomited in the right direction, he has not made a course correction in the recesses of his heart. He's still the same old Jonah, hater of Ninevites—and none too keen on doing the Lord's will either. The story ends without resolving the question of whether Jonah is going to turn around. He sits in the sun, hot and bothered and silent as the great and merciful God pleads for a little show of compassion for Jonah's fellow human beings.

The early Christians were a bunch of Jesus-loving, God-fearing clock-watchers. John's gospel, for example, is consumed with the matter of Jesus' "hour": specifically, when it would arrive and what it would bring. Paul's letters are equally powered by the imminence of parousia and how Christ would swallow up the present reality whole and ultimately and eternally be "all in all." The Book of Revelation is all

about how urgent the time is and how foolish we are to be careless with a moment when the angels themselves are holding their breath at the nearness of the final conflagration. Time, from a cosmic perspective, is the most terrible thing to waste of all.

Mark therefore wastes no words in getting to the meat of the matter in his breathlessly brief gospel. From the start, Jesus announces that here and now is the time of fulfillment, and the kingdom of God is at hand. In case anyone is wondering how to respond to that idea, Jesus is helpfully frank: “Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Some repented, we may suppose, while others believed, and a few did both. But almost no one repented enough and believed enough, as it turned out. If they had, there would have been throngs at Calvary, and the crucifixion may have been difficult to carry out.

But before we get to thinking that repentance and faith are rare and difficult things to achieve, let’s look further into the reading. Jesus walks past some fishermen just offshore, the brothers Simon and Andrew, who are casting their nets with their mundane daily hope of a catch. Jesus likes their plodding fidelity to their task and the fact that each time they throw a net, they have to believe the fish might be caught. That kind of faith and hope are great attributes in a disciple, but do they have the capacity to make the grand U-turn? Jesus says, “Come after me,” and they abandoned their nets without hesitation.

Jesus would spend the next three years teaching his followers how to be disciples. He didn’t have time for elaborate explanations there on the beach, only a few moments to ask them to turn their lives around and move in a new direction. This is how it is for the next set of brothers, James and John, tediously mending torn nets in their father’s boat; and for Nathanael, dallying under the fig tree; Matthew in the

midst of his sinful occupation at the toll gate; and Judas, too, whatever he was doing when Jesus walked through his life.

The capacity to interrupt our lives long enough to accept the invitation with conscious intent is crucial to calling ourselves by the name Christian. We also have to embrace the responsibility to turn, and turn again when necessary, so that we are always facing the direction that Jesus is headed.

Deacon Gerry

