

To Follow Jesus, What Do We Need to Drop?

Beloved friends, welcome to this third Sunday of Epiphany – a season during which (across the spectrum of Christian traditions) we focus of illumination as we worship, learn and serve. Today, scripture readings about the prophet Jonah’s winding journey and about Jesus’ launch into ministry and calling of his disciples invite us to wonder: to follow Jesus, what do we need to drop? Of what do we need to let go or release our grasp? Let’s begin this time of reflection with prayer:

God of all, we welcome your illuminating presence burning within each of us and shared among us. Grant us wisdom to hear your voice today as you long for us to release where release is needed. Amen.

My six-year old son Jonah gave permission for me to share this story with you:

Earlier this week, Jonah and I stood side by side at the kitchen sink, washing and rinsing dishes. I don’t precisely remember why I started talking to him about the story of Jonah, the biblical character. My vague recollection is that we were chatting about learning something new or figuring something out. I said, “You know, an important part of Jonah’s story is that he just didn’t seem to be able to learn something.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Jonah told me, “We’re always learning things.”

“I know what you mean,” I said, “but there are some things that each of us have a really hard time learning.” I offered him two examples from our extended family, in which I named an Achilles heel [“like so-and-so might never learn how to (blank) and so-and-so might never learn how to (blank)”].

I knew we were gaining conversational when I made myself the third subject (“like I might never learn how to”) and, without skipping a beat, Jonah grinned at me with sparkling eyes, saying: “how to stop rushing all around!”

“Ha!” I said. “You know me well. In fact, you’re probably one of the people who knows me best.” I recognized the gift it was to hear difficult truth from an empath who loves me with great depth and generosity. We will return in a moment to considering our Achilles heels (both for ourselves as individuals and wondering for our congregation as a collective) – the things we seemingly cannot or will not learn, let go of, or release.

In the kitchen sink conversation with Jonah, I went on to describe an Achilles heel of the character for whom he was named. I explained how God had told Jonah to go to Nineveh to announce to them that God was going to let their city be overthrown and destroyed because of their terrible behavior. When the people responded by repenting and changing their ways; God decided to show them grace, forgive them, and not let them be destroyed. Jonah would not accept God’s change of heart and change of plans – seemingly because it went against Jonah’s sense of retributive justice as fair and right. I further explained that this didn’t make Jonah a bad person; it just showed that he couldn’t seem to learn how to accept that things were not going to go the way he thought they would and should go.

In response to all of this, my Jonah (clearly thinking of one of the children’s illustrated Bibles in his bedroom) said, “I don’t think we have the right story about Jonah.” And we returned to lighter dishes washing banter.

I think we do our children and ourselves a disservice when we water down a story to help it fit into a certain kind of narrative box which we feel comfortable tying closed with a ribbon. The people of Nineveh reforming their behavior due to God speaking difficult truth to them through the prophet Jonah was far from the end of Jonah's story (and possibly not the most powerful part of Jonah's story for us today). I've long appreciated the sacred discomfort in which the wild little book of Jonah ends. Here are what drew me to the name for a child: Jonah was clearly flawed and so highly relatable for any of us, and Jonah had a gritty relationship with God that included the nerve to argue with and even rail against God.

I invite us to wonder: To follow Jesus more fully in the way of Love toward God, self and other; what do I need to drop and what do we as a congregation need to drop? Of what do we need to let go or release our grasp?

This question is inspired both by the story of Jonah (to which we'll return) and the dropping of fishing nets by Simon and Andrew, James and John. Let's shift to our gospel story for a moment.

I wonder what Jesus needed to drop in preparation for calling those four fishermen to drop their nets. I imagine that Jesus' family and friends were frightened by his decision to drop working in the family carpentry trade to become an itinerant preacher, teacher and healer – speaking out against their ruthless oppressors while calling the people to greater life. Even though loved ones may have feared for his safety, Jesus needed to drop obligations that would have held him back from the work to which he was called.

Jesus' circumstances help us see questions that undergird the question of what he needed to drop in order to fully follow the urging of the Holy Spirit. Underneath what we need to drop are questions of motivation:

- What deeper underlying need is revealed as we recognize what we must drop or release?
- What good could come from letting go of that behavior or pattern?

What need was revealed as Jesus recognized his need to let go of his attachments to home and livelihood? Jesus needed to be on the move in order to live into his full potential as a courageous leader of great conviction and compassion for his people.

What good could come from Jesus letting go of his normal patterns? His community (then and now) could be inspired by his core message, shared in the words we heard today from the gospel of Mark:

“This is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand! Change your hearts and minds, and believe this Good News! ... Follow me; I will make you fishers of humankind.”

There was such contagious passion in Jesus' message that his first four disciples followed suit. What did they drop? They literally dropped their fishing nets. Along with the nets, they left behind their coworkers and the regular rhythms of daily work. What need was revealed by their decisive dropping of their work to follow Jesus? Perhaps they needed something that they sensed in Jesus's energy and message. What good could come from them following Jesus' example of dropping that which would have held them back from responding to the Holy Spirit's nudge to follow Jesus?

Their bold move set an example and gave permission to others around them to release other attachments in order to follow the way of Jesus.

In continuing to wonder what each of us (and perhaps our congregation as a whole) needs to drop or release in order to more fully follow Jesus, let's return to Jonah's story. I sense that Jonah needed to drop his grip on certainty about a particular outcome for the people of Nineveh. What underlying need could have been revealed if and once Jonah recognized his stuckness on a particular outcome for those people? Perhaps he could have come to terms with his orientation toward retributive justice as the way he wanted the power of God's love to intervene with the Ninevite people. What good could have come from such a deeper recognition and letting go? Perhaps grace could have taken hold more powerfully in Jonah's life.

What do you need to let go of or release? I said that my son's Jonah's words to me rang true – that I need to learn “to not rush all around.” And the need that I have identified as underlying that behavior is this: I feel compelled to be engaged in tending to responsibilities at almost all times. I need to let go of the scurrying around behavior (thinking it will accomplish that). And the good that could come from my letting go might be greater sustainability of my life energy.

So what do you need to let go of or at least loosen your grasp on? And what deeper underlying need is revealed if you can recognize what you need to drop or release? And what good could come from letting go of that behavior or pattern? And I encourage us to take with us a sense of wondering the same questions for the good of the life of our collective – our congregation.

I want to come to a close with words from a favorite song for our family in the car, which is called "Inside the Whale." It's possible that Jonah needed another turn inside of a whale – because he learned great lessons the first time. This song is about the times we need inside a whale – by Bryan Sirchio:

*"Jonah heard God call and tried to run away
Confronting Nineveh was not Jonah's plan A
Amazing what a couple days inside a whale can change
Whales are where we hear the call and stop drifting away*

*And could it be, grace is so amazing
That in the end it's impossible to fail
Could grace mean, nothing's ever wasted
Including time we spend inside the whale*

*There have been some times when God has called my name
And just as Jonah did, I've tried to sail away
Been swallowed by some whales until my running was complete
Truth is there are things I've needed whales to help me see*

*And sometimes God it's not that I am trying to run away
It's just that I'm not sure it's you I hear
So thank you for the time you knew I needed to believe the Voice was yours
Sometimes it's taken me years*

*Jonah finally did what Yahweh called him to
Even though he took the less efficient route
But maybe that's why this whale of a tale still speaks to me
'Cause I have not reached where I am today too easily*

*And could it be, grace is so amazing
That in the end it's impossible to fail
Could grace mean, nothing's ever wasted
Including time we spend inside the whale*

May we give thanks for our times inside the whale. And may we intentionally move forward, hoping to let go of what needs release – such that we can more fully follow Jesus in the way of Love, because Love is counting on each of us. Amen.

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Jonah 1:1-3, 3:1-5&10, 4:1-11; Mark 1:14-20