

June 26, 2011 Jonah 3:1-10, Matthew 28:16-20

The bible is full of stories about people of faith being sent on a mission from God.

Our story from Jonah is one of them. And today's reading is, in my opinion, the highlight of the story. Do you remember much of the famous story of Jonah?.....

So after hearing today's reading, we might be left with some questions about how the people of Ninevah (located in modern day Iraq) came to be spared the wrath of God. Do we believe this is literally how it works for people to avoid God's wrath and receive God's forgiveness (Some people of the city start to believe Jonah's message their lives were going to be destroyed, so the king makes a law that forces people to repent and behave themselves, and be sorry)? I mean, how can anybody really make someone be sorry? Is that how people are to get God to "change God's mind" as it is described in the story? Maybe more than questions like these are the ones we might be left with as we see Jonah and how he felt about the mission that God sent him on- even after the success of his mission.

I mean, Jonah's problem was not one of doubt. That's not why he didn't want to go to Ninevah. It wasn't a lack of faith that was his problem. It wasn't even fear about what might happen to him that caused him to run from God's mission for his life.

Maybe it was a lack of compassion, or consideration (or love) for this foreign people who, though not part of the chosen people of Israel, still had God's heart just the same.

But when Jonah finally accepted his mission, even though his heart wasn't in it, and the people of Ninevah responded to his message and God changed his mind about the destructive outcome from their behavior. Jonah felt... how can I put this... well, *he experienced the whole thing in a negative way* (and I don't mean the part about being eaten by a fish)... And the end of the book of Jonah describes Jonah sitting there all alone, under a dead bush, roasting in the hot Iraqi sun. And Jonah says to himself: "I am better off dead." And he is so angry about Ninevah being spared that God explains himself to Jonah: "...shouldn't I have pity on so many in that city- more than 120,000 innocent children in it, and that's not counting the animals." (That's a paraphrase, but it's pretty close. You can read it in the final verses of chapter 4.)

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus spoke of a mission. And what he said and those to whom he said it can mean a lot to us as people of faith today.

"Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that I commanded." That's what he said.

But included in the crowd of people to whom Jesus was speaking were some described as doubters. Here's how the group was described in verse 16 & 17 of our reading: "*The eleven disciples went to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him, even though some of them doubted.*" That's how some of the "disciples" to whom Jesus gave this mission, are described. There's something amazing about the Grace of God toward us that means in part, God's faith in the potential of even doubting disciples to be transformed into Mission Fulfilling witnesses to the world.

The reason I bring this up, is that over the years of being with many people of churches, I've run into some doubters. And also some strong believers, who have put their hearts and their hopes completely on God, and getting to know God through Jesus Christ.

But the reason I bring this up is that sometimes, these doubters or these firm believers... they are the same people. And I've been one of them. Who isn't at times? The reading from Matthew describes Jesus giving his mission to people just like us.

But let me ask us this, from the standpoint of today's reading from the closing verses of Matthew: "Have any of us ever made a disciple?"

Did you know that at one of the more recent U. M. General Conferences, a promise about "Witnessing" was added to our membership vows. In the past we only promised to live out our faith as members of our church through our "prayers, presence, gifts and service". But now we also add "through out witness" to our promises. (Fortunately for most of us, we got in before they did that.)

From our discussion group last Sunday, something that comes to mind when we read of Jesus sending his disciples to make more disciples, is the potentially unappreciated visit from a Witnesser. And however we respond to Jesus' commission, I sense that we want to we want to avoid being witnessers like these:

A teen approaches me in a Mall in Columbus, Ohio: "Are you saved?" is their only question. They see themselves as witnessing to me of their faith.

Karen was once working in our flower garden a few years back in our house in Ohio and a team of 2 Witnessers came up to her, and said: "If you died today, do you know what would happen to you?" That was it. No hello. No names exchanged. No getting to know what life is like for each other. And when Karen's answer said something about heaven and her hope for life with God that never ends, they left. She wasn't somebody that mattered to them after all. I guess in their way they cared about her spiritual salvation, but I don't believe they cared about her. And that mattered to me.

I remember as a college age young adult in Pennsylvania once, 2 people from a church came to my house to tell me of their concern for my place in eternity, only to find out that (according to their denomination) exactly only 140-some thousand people were going to get to go to heaven... and they already had more than that many in their church! So not only was I being witnessed to, and invited, but I was being left out at the same time!

I was so glad when I found out that the parsonage here was so close to the church that everyone of Homer would know that we were the clergy family, and therefore either in no need of witnessing, or (possibly) completely beyond hope (depending on your perspective). I just knew that here I was finally safe from religious people, and that I could interact only (or mostly) with the much more fun non-religious persons, like halibut and salmon fishers, or United Methodists, or United Methodist halibut and salmon fishers... and some of them have boats. But I knew that no one would be knocking on our door while we live here to bring their witness about our eternal lostness or foundness.

But how wrong I was. This past year- Holy Week 2011... not an uncomplicated week, to be sure. If I remember correctly, our church shared in a total of 4 Worship Services that week! So imagine my surprise when during the week before Easter, a delightful couple came by to talk to us about Jesus since, as they put it, with all the attention on Easter they thought this might be the time to see if we've been giving the Lord any consideration lately.

I felt like saying something about how I am always giving the Lord all kinds of consideration because that is my job! But somehow I kind of had the idea that asserting myself as a Christian because I am paid to be one really wasn't the witness I wanted to give even in return for the witness I was being given.

I bring up the concept of witnessing because ones witness and ones mission, go hand in hand.

The mission to make disciples is all about sharing ones faith with others. And that's what is meant by witnessing. Or by being invitational as a church family... to others.

Now this can be a part of a much bigger discussion, but I'm going to conclude my remarks today by offering some thoughts about what I think are some of the important things to focus on when it comes to sharing ones faith... to do (in our lives) what Jesus said... making disciples of all nations, teaching others to obey what Jesus commanded (and remember, his commandments were all about loving others as we have been loved, or as we would want to be loved).

One thing I want to encourage is that we listen as much as talk. In fact, listen more than talking. This is something I have learned more about from many of you- as you relate stories of how you learned to know and serve in some of the interesting villages and places in Alaska that you have lived or taught or worked. Most of all, we should speak by our actions and by living the commandments of Jesus. And in our context today, pray about how to do that when sharing real life with co-workers, friends in a coffee shop, classmates, and others. I suspect that one of the biggest difficulties we have with sharing our faith, is a lack of attention paid to it.

Another thing we can know for sure when it comes to sharing ones faith (the work of making a disciple) is that we do that best by caring for people where they are. Get to truly know people; and get to know the situations people are living with. There are no shortcuts to this, and just walking up to a stranger in a Mall and confronting them about their salvation as a way of witnessing or evangelizing, is just mostly annoying. And we should admit it.

But here's the thing. And this came up in our discussion last week too. Most of us know that we already hesitate greatly when it comes to seeing ourselves on a mission to make disciples or grow the church, or actively live out the membership vow about being a witness to our faith. Holding ourselves back from over-trying would seem to be the least of our problems.

Maybe our sometimes hesitation to see ourselves as witnesses is because at a certain level

we know that what we say to invite a person to church (or to a life of faith) or whatever we say about what God means to us, will likely fall upon ears that are already tired out from too many bad experiences with such things... so that even if we invite without judgment- our words are more than likely to come across as just one more Mall witness. And not only do we know that to be counter productive to church-growth, who wants to be like that anyway?

But being Jesus' disciples surely means more than adding a new Sunday worshiper to the life of this or any church. And I believe it means more than an easy answer to a question from a visitor to our door, who wants to talk to us about where we will spend eternity.

Dallas Willard (long time College professor and Christian Philosopher) describes Christian discipleship as a process lived out by BOTH our efforts AND by God's actions of Grace within us: "Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort. In fact, nothing inspires and enhances effort like the experience of Grace." He lifts up ones inner and outer transformation by God's grace- as the true mark of discipleship.

I don't know if this will help any of us with our response to Jesus' words in what is so often called "The Great Commission" or not. And I don't know if my words today will be received as something encouraging when it comes to our relying upon God's grace in our life's priorities (like in our marriages, our responsibilities, our code of ethical behavior, our struggles with addiction, our efforts as parents or grandparents, and on and on).

But I think Dallas Willard is right about effort and grace and being conformed to Christ as the key to Christian discipleship. My belief beyond doubt is that as we grow in our relationship with God, and as we learn the things we can learn from Jesus' teachings, we just might be so full of gratitude for what we are experiencing from God's hand upon our lives, that our hesitation to invite and share faith with others will be overwhelmed by our amazement at what God is doing for us even in all the ups and downs of real life in the world.

Let us pray:

Grant us I pray, O God, the grace today to seek first your kingdom and the way of Jesus in our hearts and lives- and to trust all our needs to your care. Help us to grow so in relationship with you, that we know how to be your witnesses in our homes and daily lives- wherever we are, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.