

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 24, 2021

JONAH 3:1-5, 10 | PSALM 62:5-12 | 1 CORINTHIANS 7:29-31 | MARK 1:14-20

A couple of years ago, one of my former seminary classmates was working at an Episcopal church in a tony Connecticut suburb, let's call it, I don't know, Greenwich, when he took his youth group to Lewiston, Idaho for a mission trip. When I saw pictures of the trip, I thought, *Well, I don't understand why they went to Idaho of all places, but what a great experience it must be for these youth.* Only later did I realize that their mission trip wasn't in Lewiston, Idaho. It was in Lewiston, Maine. My hometown. And, as you can imagine, the first thing that popped into my head is something that's not exactly homily friendly.

If this feels a little too remote, you can think about this in your own context. Imagine one day you were driving up Wyckoff Avenue and you saw a school bus in the Wyckoff Reformed parking lot full of kids from the places churches like ours normally send kids on mission trips to. Maybe West Virginia, North Dakota, or the South Bronx. And when you asked them what they were doing in suburban New Jersey, they replied in their most earnest and chipper voice, "We're here for a mission trip."

Maybe you would be confused because you'd think, "Well, my community doesn't need a mission trip. We don't have problems. Not mission trip problems, anyway." Or maybe you would be offended because you think we can solve our own problems. We don't need a bunch of outsiders coming in here to tell us what to do. Or maybe you'd be cynical. Funny how people take a sudden interest in service the summer after their junior year of high school. Or maybe that image seems absurd, the kind of thing that would never happen, and isn't worth thinking about.

But the fact that it strikes us as absurd probably means it is worth thinking about. Because our conception of the mission of the church is often wrapped up in very human notions of power, service, and charity. Mission is what happens when people with power, money, influence, status, whatever, serve people who have less. We share our blessings with the people outside. Things only flow one way. Mission doesn't flow uphill.

One of the reasons we think of mission as something that happens to other people somewhere else with less power than us is because of stories like today's gospel reading. In particular, one verse that can give you some pretty wacky ideas about mission when you take it out of context. Mark tells us that as Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea--for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people."

The way we usually interpret this story is that Simon and Andrew represent us. The boat represents the church. Jesus represents Jesus. And the fish represent other people. If Simon and Andrew's job is to get lots of fish into the boat, our job must be to get lots of people into the church. How should you get them into the boat? It doesn't matter. What happens when they're in the boat? I don't know. All that matters is that they're in the boat. Just fill the nets to the brim and pack them in the boat like, well, sardines.

And you can already see some of the problems here. If this is the way you understand mission, you will end up treating people like objects. You will end up using whatever bait you need to get them in the boat, and then move on to the next thing. People will become a means to an end. They will exist mostly so we have someone to "do mission" on.

I would guess that's why the idea of someone going on a mission trip in our community confuses, bewilders, and maybe even offends us. It's not because service is bad. It's not because we can't have meaningful partnerships. It's that too often our understanding of mission reinforces unhealthy power dynamics. It's because we suspect that underneath all the churchy language and slick exterior, these people see us as fish. They're not actually interested in our lives. We're just objects of their pity. A line in the resume, a number on the ledger, a face in a picture they show their friends back home.

But pay attention to the whole story. As soon as Jesus shows up in St. Mark's gospel, he announces, "The time is fulfilled." The kingdom of God is here. And we're going to go there together. We're not there

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yet. But we're going to go together. And we're going to get there by encountering the world as it is. Not the world we know. Not the world we want to believe exists. Not the world we want. But the world as it is. And wherever Jesus goes, that's where the kingdom of God is breaking into the world.

And if you do a super literal translation of the Greek here, Jesus's invitation is something like *Come after me, and I will turn you into those who fish for humans*. Too often, we get caught up in *fishing for humans* part and forget the *come after me part*. The *come after me* part isn't as fun as the fishing part. Because the *come after me* part means we're not quite where Jesus wants us yet. If we ever think that we've made it and the goal of mission is to make other people become like us, Jesus says, you're not there yet. Come after me some more.

Which means the invitation Simon and Andrew extend out isn't their own invitation, their own culture, their own rituals, their own traditions, their own habits. The invitation they give is just an extension of the invitation Jesus first gave to them. See this isn't a story about pulling people into the church building like fish. And it's not a story about making other people more like us. It's a story about getting caught up with others in the embrace of God's compassion. It makes us more than patrons to other people. It makes us partners.

When mission goes awry, when it becomes exploitative or abusive or just sort of gross, it's usually because we forget that we are still following Jesus alongside others. It's when we forget that the power we've accumulated doesn't get us any closer to God than anybody else. Mission becomes self-serving when we forget that we still have a ways to go to get to the kingdom of God.

Once we know that we're not at the kingdom of God yet, it opens us up to learning from and being enriched by others. I know we're a long way off from the kingdom of God, so tell me what I need to know to get there with you. If you're a church in the South Bronx, tell me what I need to know about housing insecurity and gentrification. If you're a church in North Dakota, tell me what I need to know about fracking and the environment. If you're a church in West Virginia, tell me what I need to know about public health. If you're a church in Lewiston, Maine, tell me what I need to know about refugee resettlement.

Because when I see you, I don't see a fish that needs to be pulled into a boat. I don't see someone who needs to be rescued. I don't see someone who needs to be catch up to me. I don't see someone who needs to be remade in my image. I see a partner who's going to walk toward the kingdom of God with me. I see someone I can't get to the kingdom of God without.

Come after me, Jesus says. And follow them into the kingdom.

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