

Religious Life Sunday Year B

Jonah 3:1-5,10

II Corinthians 7:29-31

Mark 1:14-20

Be All That You Can Be

January 21, 2024 Church of the Mediator (Harbert, Michigan) Abraham

In our gospel story, Mark tells about God using people just as they are: Andrew, Simon, James, and John went directly from fishing to following Jesus. Jesus gave them necessary training along the way and then sent the Holy Spirit to further guide them, but they never had to pretend to be who they weren't. They had been faithful to their jobs as fishers, so Jesus upgraded them into fishers of people. Had they not been doing their jobs at the Sea of Galilee at the time, they would not have been able to respond to the call of Jesus.

It is the same with us. We don't need to shy away from improving our economic situation or from educational opportunities, but we also don't need to pretend to be anyone other than ourselves. God can not use fake images to bless people. God uses real people to make the world a better place. We must never rely on the false gods of wealth and social prestige to save us. God alone is the source of our being and fulfillment. Underneath all of our pretensions and dissemblings, we find that we are exactly who we ought to be, even though we are not the fully mature selves we will be someday if we only let God grow us. God does not make junk, and if we trust in God, God will take the good and worthy persons that we are and bring us to perfection.

And that brings us to our first two readings this morning: Repent! Change Now! Stop going down the path that leads to your worst self and hurts everyone, and turn onto the path that leads to your best self and helps everyone. Repent - if you are doing things that hurt you or others (that's "sin"), then actually change what you are doing. Don't just feel bad about it - change your actions. Feeling bad isn't wrong, and it is a good catalyst for change, but it is not enough. As with most important things in life, repentance is easier said than done, but it can be done, because it is done with the Grace of God (and only by the Grace of God.) We will all make progress on the path of repentance, and we will all fail, but the key is getting up again after every failure, asking for forgiveness from those we have hurt (including ourselves), and starting down the road of repentance once again. The destination is growth in Christ, which includes growth into our best selves: images of God and channels of the Holy Spirit, bringing the love, joy, and peace of Jesus to our small part of the world. There are many ways to help us repent from our destructive paths onto our edifying paths: prayer, scripture reading, church attendance, and others. Those are means to an end, and every persons' needed disciplines will not be the same. But the one thing we know we can rely on is the fact that Jesus will never turn us away, whether or not we are on the right path.

Sometimes, becoming our best, true selves does not involve repenting and changing our behavior from hurtful to helpful; instead it includes realizing that some parts of our lives simply need to change so that the outer self more truly matches our inner self. We might need to change careers, or churches, or genders in order for our true selves to grow and become "fishers of people" - drawing people into the love of Jesus as heard in our gospel reading this morning.

That brings us to two special topics we are observing this Sunday: the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" and "Religious Life Sunday." During the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we spend time praying for and expressing gratitude for denominations different than our own. Unity does not mean conformity. Different denominations serve to bring Jesus to different people and different people to Jesus, but the goal is always the same: bringing Jesus and people together. Yes, there are a very small number of groups who call themselves Christian but whose concepts of God and Jesus are so different from the Historic Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic understanding that they do not really fit into the call to unity, but even they might be

doing some good - we are not to judge, even if we perceive that it is better not to cooperate with those groups. But overall, the vast majority of denominations are beloved parts of the entire Body of Christ, even if some of the outward details are different. Just like individuals, they have followed the path of their true selves in order to become "fishers of people" (even if they fish in a different way than we do.) So, let us take some time this week to pray for some of the other churches close by, and be grateful for the fact that they can serve people in different ways than we can.

The other special observance for today is "Religious Life Sunday". That might take some more explaining: in this context, the word "religious" means people and groups who take special vows and live in special ways in order to help them grow into their true selves and become the images of God as they were created to be. Another word that can be used is "monastic" (the two words "religious" and monastic" actually describe different ways of life, but for this sermon and this observance, we can use the two terms interchangeably.) Many denominations have religious/monastic groups within them, including (and to the surprise of some people) the Episcopal Church. The different religious/monastic communities in the Episcopal Church all have different histories, backgrounds, traditions, and lifestyles. In that way they are like individual Christians, and like different denominations: all the different groups are needed as a necessary part of the Body of Christ. My particular group is St. Gregory's Abbey outside of Three Rivers in St. Joseph County. We live on 600 acres of wooded land that we reforested after moving there several decades ago. We spend most of our time in communal and private prayer - in fact, we gather in the church at 4:00am to pray for you and the entire world. We also have three guesthouses for groups and individuals to come for retreat. We host an annual summer program for men from all over the country and of many denominations to come and see what monastic life is like. We produce books, calendars, and newsletters as a way of helping people grow into their true selves. We have no individual possessions (everything is owned by the group.) We would love to pray for you and for anyone else -write us or email us with your prayer requests. Other religious or monastic communities in the Episcopal Church have different ministries, but all are needed.

Monastic life has helped me become my true self. I am not completely grown, as you can ask anyone who knows me. But as it has helped me, it can help others. It might help you. It might help someone you know. Don't dismiss it, and don't put it off until it is too late. If you have questions about the process involved in joining a monastery or religious order, ask me after the service this morning. If you or someone you know finds monastic life helpful but cannot fully commit to such a change in lifestyle, you might find it helpful to visit us for retreat or become an associate (we call them confraters). Write us or email us with your questions about visiting or becoming a confrater.

Whatever we do, may we make sure we are on the path to growth in Christ (that's heaven), instead of the path to shrinking in on ourselves (that's hell.) Repent. Actually Change what we are doing. We are worth the effort. We will all fail, so we must not condemn others when they fail. Jesus does not condemn us. Jesus walks with us, even when we are on the wrong path. And we must also remember that just as there are many wrong paths, there are many good paths, so do what it takes to get on your good path, even if it is not the same as others'. The Episcopal Church is certainly a good path, but might not be right for someone with a Baptist or Pentecostal heart. Living in a family or as a single person are also good paths, but might not be right for someone with a monastic heart. All good paths are needed, because they strengthen each other. They help us become our true selves. They don't change who we are (Andrew, Simon, James, and John were still fishers.) Rather, both the path of repentance and the path of true vocation make us more who we are - more real, more "fishers of people" drawing others into the fulfilling love of Jesus. AMEN