

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

January 22, 2012

Jonah 1:1-10; Mark 1:14-20

You Must Be Kidding

I have discovered a way to keep my brain cells from atrophy. At least once a day I visit the AARP Website and play all kinds of games designed to avoid brain rot. I particularly enjoy a Mahjong game. The object of the game is to find matches among the pieces. There are times when I stare at the screen not seeing the match for a particular piece. It is not until I switch my view that I see the sought after match. This tells me over and over that in life as well as on a computer screen I cannot see or know everything that I might need to see or know in order to understand a particular issue or to be comfortable with a new way of thinking. This game has taught me to understand the need to look at each situation from many angles or perspectives. That is, for me, a life long learning exercise. Is it for you also? It is also a very good excuse to play a guilt free computer game for a half hour.

Did you notice the stark contrast between the two readings for this morning? One is a fable; the other, a description of the calling of the first disciples. The human/divine interaction in the Jonah story is, for me, I confess, a lot more believable than that of the calling of the 4 disciples. Picture yourself in the position of Peter, for example. He owned his own boat and his own fishing business. He had a wife and a mother-in-law and, maybe children for whom he was responsible. James and John fished with their father. Was he getting old and expecting his sons to take over the fishing when he was no longer able to work? Those family ties bound all four of the men to their boats and

their town. How could they possibly just walk off and leave all of that responsibility behind? Or did they just walk off?

Do you ever wonder what must have gone on between the lines of all those scripture passages with which we are so familiar? People come into the stories and into our lives but we really don't know much about them. We don't know if Andrew, James or John were married. We don't know if Peter and his wife had children. We don't know what the cost of discipleship was to all those family members who simply appear and disappear without explanation.

At any rate, according to all of the gospels, the four did not hesitate to jump out of the boats and go off with Jesus, leaving us to imagine what it must have been like for Zebedee, John and James' father. 'You are going to do what?' 'Now?' 'You must be kidding.' Imagine the response of Peter's wife. 'You are going to just leave your boat and go off into God knows what.' 'Who's going to put food on the table and pay the bills?' 'You must be kidding.'

And yet, the two families became part of the community of Jesus' disciples and he became a part of the Capernaum community and particularly of those two families. Recall that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law who then got up and served them a meal. Remember the mother of James and John who asked Jesus for a special place in his kingdom for her sons. We learn through those tidbits of information that when Jesus extended his invitation it was not only to two sets of brothers but to their families and their community. The families and the community responded becoming the seed from which the ministry of Jesus blossomed and grew. Never was the work of Jesus done in isolation. It was from the very beginning a work of community.

Let's think about that for a moment. Those four men and their families were the foundation upon which we now stand. Who was in the first community? Men and women of different ages were a part of that community. Some were married and some, still single. Peter was established with his own boat; his own home and wife and extended family. Andrew probably lived in Peter's household. James and John were younger, still learning the art of fishing from their father Zebedee.

We don't know much about those people but we do know that Jesus found welcome and warmth in the small community of Capernaum; a warmth that he did not find in his home town of Nazareth. The people of Nazareth had a narrowly focused understanding of Jesus that was an unstated, 'who does he think he is...he has got to be kidding' response to Jesus' words in the Nazareth synagogue.

When I traveled to Capernaum a few years ago, I saw the ruins of an ancient synagogue. That synagogue had been built on the foundation of an even older synagogue. It is conceivable that when I walked on the floor stones of that ruin, I was walking on the same stones upon which Jesus began his teaching and healing ministry simply because Jesus had been welcomed into Capernaum and valued for his words, his empathy, his presence.

Jesus knew that he needed community. He needed a place of total acceptance to which he could come for refreshment and renewal. He needed to be surrounded by people who cherished him as much as he cherished them. He found that community in Capernaum. From that small village, he went out to preach the Sermon on the Mount. From Capernaum he went out into the wilderness and prepared a meal for thousands of people. When he needed a time alone, it was from Capernaum that he traveled to an

isolated place for prayer and reflection and the place to which he returned with his disciples who had been saved from the storm.

Community is sometimes a place. It's the neighborhood where I grew up or the school from which I graduated. Yet, Community is much more than a place. It is a feeling or a sense of belonging to or of being a part of a group. When I define the First Church community for myself, I visualize this sanctuary that is just a beautiful hall until it is filled with the people who make it a holy place. I see families and individuals. I see folks who I know very well and other folks who I would like to know more. I see people who come week after week to renew that bond between themselves and God; and between themselves and friends of a lifetime as well as friends that are new.

Sometimes community can be a challenge. We don't all think the same way or believe the same way or, believe it or not, vote the same way. I've known that since my childhood. My mother was a dedicated Republican and my father, a rock solid Democrat. My mother went out to work for the Republican candidates and my father, the Democrats. In fact, my mother never learned to drive, so my father would drop her off at the Republican meeting before going off to his Democratic one. Their secret to marital harmony was that they never talked politics in the house. They just went to the polls and cancelled out each other's vote. In a healthy community there are some things that you just don't say.

At other times, community can be a time and place for shared strength and healing. This past year has been such a time and such a place for us, hasn't it? We have grieved each in our hearts and we have grieved together. Together we have found the strength to begin to take baby steps into the future. We don't yet know what that future

holds, but we do know that the community of First Church is resilient and faithful. The words of the 14th Century mystic, Julian of Norwich are an echo of that future. She writes: “and all will be well; all will be well; all manner of things will be well.”

We are well. Our doors swing open in welcome to folks who come to worship, to shop, to find assistance at Jump or a bag lunch at Small Potatoes. Our door swing open in welcome companionship to the New Alpha community as well as to AA and Alanon. Our doors also swing open as many of us leave to volunteer at COTS or drive for Meals on Wheels or bring dinners to Dismas House. Those doors open out to individuals or groups going to Haiti or India or Mississippi or with our youth to Maine, Boston, Virginia, or Sara Holbrook Center. We are well in all manner of ways.

In all that we do as well as in all that we sense or feel, we are emulating the Capernaum community for we welcome Christ into our midst and follow him into the world beyond our limited boundaries. Jesus and his disciples went out to the wider world beyond their village bringing hope, understanding and love to all those they met. A trickle, then a stream and finally a flood of all kinds of people joined the community begun in Capernaum. And this was the ‘you have got to be kidding’ test for the followers of Jesus.

From their earliest years, the disciples had learned about clean and unclean. They knew that women outside their families were to be ignored. They knew that cripples and beggars were unclean. They knew that Samaritans and gentiles were anathema. They knew that tax collectors and prostitutes were unclean. They knew that lepers were excluded from the community because they must have done something sinful and were doomed to live out their lives in poverty and exile.

Jesus came into their midst with a new message of absolute openness to everyone. It shook them to the core. All they had believed in was challenged by the inclusiveness of Jesus' voice of authority and acts of compassion. He taught them in a parable using a Samaritan as the righteous one. He touched lepers, healing them. He challenged a crowd readying to stone a woman taken in adultery. He sat down alone with a Samaritan woman and drew her into his orbit. He argued with those who chose to see healing on the Sabbath as work, not love. He healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman and he ushered his disciples into banquet halls where they were surrounded by tax collectors and 'sinners.'

The miracle of this radical teaching was that the Capernaum community found the strength to accept and to embrace the new viewpoint because it was taught by Jesus with that authority and with a message of absolute welcome. Joining in fellowship with Jesus, and with lepers, cripples, women they followed Jesus to Jerusalem and witnessed the cross and the resurrection. Joining with other disciples, they became the first Generation of Christianity and the model to us for faithfulness, for extravagant welcome and for joyous inclusiveness.

Through all the ages since, we have struggled to be faithful and often failed. My hometown of Boston was so exclusive that Quakers, Baptists and Jews were expelled or killed. Roger Williams, one of my personal heroes, established Rhode Island as a place of acceptance for all people, all beliefs. In our history there have been too few Roger Williams and too many dogmatists whose ideal is exclusivity akin to the Pharisees; not to the inclusivity of Jesus.

But as we hear the echo of Jesus we begin to understand that is our sacred calling, our sacred place. Community to us the faithful followers of Jesus from Capernaum to First Congregational Church is a place of welcome and of shared strength. It is a sense of affirmation, of love, of home. It is an ongoing act of faithfulness. All are welcome here. No kidding. Amen.