

Discerning God's Call

Reflection for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shared at Catholic Evening Prayer on January 24, 2021

Jon 3:1-5, 10

1 Cor 7:29-31

Mk 1:14-20

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” These words from Frederick Buechner guided the discernment group I participated in just before this semester began. Our small group listened to how biblical figures such as Samuel, Mary, and Moses responded to the call. Fittingly, some of these call stories were featured in the lectionary this week and last week. Even though the discernment group meetings have paused, the discernment continues. Barely a month into 2021, at the start of a new semester, a new administration, there seems to be no better time to reflect on how God is calling us to heal the deep scars, pain, and injustice around us.

Today’s readings offer two very different responses to God’s call. One option (though not recommended) is to run away from God. In the first reading, Jonah tries to hide from his authentic self, his destiny as prophet. He vehemently, most definitely, does not want to share the Word of God with the people of Nineveh. But God persists, even when it takes a storm and giant fish for Jonah to begrudgingly accept his vocation. And it turns out that the people of Nineveh were not nearly as stubborn or terrible as Jonah had assumed. They receive his message incredibly well, with open hearts, much to his surprise. When Jonah follows God’s call, he is able to accomplish a seemingly impossible task. He prompts solidarity, community, and humble faith in God. Even when the call seems scary, God does not call us to do more than we can handle...even when we try to hide, God will continuously nudge us towards responding to the deep needs of the world with our whole being.

Another way to respond to the call is to drop everything immediately and follow. In today’s gospel, Jesus is attentive to the skills and talents of James and John and Simon and Andrew. Knowing and appreciating their ability to cast and mend nets and wait for fish, Jesus specifically calls them to work towards the kingdom of God as fishers of people. Even though the disciples leave what is familiar they are still being true to the core of who they are; they now have an unexpected new way to practice their vocation as fishermen. While they may not

spend the rest of their days on the shoreline, they still must cast their hearts out to the poor, persistently mend the suffering wounds of their neighbors, patiently wait with Jesus, and nourish people with the gospel, bringing them closer to Christ. As fishers of people, the disciples use their gifts, their deepest gladness, to nourish God's people. God sometimes calls us to go to a new place, to practice our skills in a new context to realize our gifts fully.

Of course, there are more than just these two ways of responding to God's call. In between these two extremes is the gradual process of discernment, the slow reveal of God's will, of uncovering our deepest desires day by day...and slowly mustering the courage to accept the invitation. Discerning God's call can be challenging, it is; the people of Nineveh are unlikely models who can offer some wisdom for this third way of listening and responding to God's word. Like the Ninevites, we don't often hear the voice of God speaking audibly, directly to us. We don't often see Jesus approaching us on the shore. We do, however, have the opportunity to listen together and discern God's will together. We have unexpected prophets in our lives, those mentors and friends who accompany us in our discernment, offering wisdom for living authentically and in relation with one another. We do have the opportunity to feel the Holy Spirit embracing us.

Along with these prophetic voices and mentors, we can also let the words of scripture guide our callings. Lectio Divina is one way to open ourselves to hear God's wisdom in community. During these Bible study gatherings, we approach scripture as living word and let the spirit speak to us as we prayerfully reflect on the week's upcoming readings. We sit together and ponder how God is working in our lives, calling us to grow a little closer, to live the gospel a little more deeply at this moment. We notice the words that resonate, reflect on how these relate to our personal experiences and offer prayers of petition and thanksgiving to connect our lives to the needs of the world. The practice of Lectio helps us to embody the message expressed by St. Paul in the second reading: to understand and experience our daily lives with the realization that the kingdom of God is at hand; our time on earth is limited. He prompts us to think: Do we recognize the urgency of incorporating the gospel into our daily lives? Whenever we weep and mourn, whenever we experience gladness? We can't wait until we are old. We must start listening now and then never stop listening. We must listen with not just our ears, but our hearts and minds. The insights we have during Lectio each week may be small, but incrementally, we are working together to live our lives committed to bringing our deepest selves to our communities. Weekly lectio spiritual reading has indeed helped me discover those places where God is calling in each moment.

As we begin this second week of the new semester, let us commit ourselves--as individuals, a church, a campus, a nation, a world--to reflect on where God is calling us and who God is calling us to be. Discerning

God's will is an ongoing process. While you may have some big decisions to make--choosing a major, job searching--let's start small by bringing some part of today's scripture message into our daily lives this week. Maybe it was the message that time is running out, of repentance. Maybe you were most struck by the immediacy with which the disciples and Ninevites respond. Choose a word or phrase that resonated, and let this wisdom permeate and guide your existence this week. Remember that our ultimate vocation is to love and serve one another. It is through service and listening together as a community of faith that we discover our unique gladness. Amen.