

Third Sunday after Epiphany – Brian Hartley

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Two weeks ago today, I found myself sitting in the Pierre Trudeau airport somewhat exhausted from the busyness of a conference I had attended in Montreal. Wading through airports is not my cup of tea these days and, I am sad to say, American customs officers apparently are required to master the art of surliness. I wasn't quite sure whether to take the comment, "welcome home," as snide or somewhat cynical. And, getting back to St. Louis is no longer as easy as it once was when TWA ruled the skies. So it was that I found myself on a small plane headed to Philadelphia in which roughly a third of the seats must have been taken up by my fellow conference attendees. And, since we were headed for the city of brotherly love, most of those seats were filled by the Lutheran intelligentsia, with a few Anglicans, Methodists, and Presbyterians thrown in for good measure.

I wish that I had had a voice recorder with me on that plane. For, you see, when the non-liturgical, non-clerical, non-academic populace boarded the plane and began to strike up conversations with folks in the adjoining seats who were engrossed in such scintillating reading as the 2006 edition of Evangelical Lutheran Worship you would have thought that there was fear that some kind of cult was taking over Canadian airports. I don't think if my Lutheran friends had instead been Mormons and had stripped down to their special underwear that the non-religious passengers could have been any more shocked. It was as if Garrison Keillor's town of Lake Wobegon had been plopped down in French-speaking Quebec and were now about to unleash the questions from Luther's Shorter Catechism during beverage service. No self-respecting Quebecois could have anticipated boarding a plane filled with such a pious group of somber Protestant clerics. I am sure they must have thought that the end of the world was near.

It is that sense of shock and disorientation that today's gospel lesson is meant to elicit. This gospel, attributed to Mark, has already attempted to jerk us out of our lethargy and expectations with the appearance of the ascetic John, the rending of the heavens at Jesus' baptism, and the literal throwing out of Jesus by the Spirit into the wilderness. This earliest of the gospels has established a pattern for all of us familiar with the Hebrew scriptures—we have marched through the waters and wandered in the wilderness. We are just bouncing merrily along in familiar territory, when, for the first time in Mark's gospel, Jesus opens his mouth and speaks. In one respect, time itself can be divided between what has come before these words and all that will follow afterwards. Just as God the Father had torn the heavens apart a few verses earlier, now Jesus the Son tears Galilee apart with his forceful pronouncement, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near," (1:14).

In like fashion, the prophet, Jonah, finds himself shocked by the unexpected. Not only is he commanded to “get up and go,” but he finds himself in metropolitan Nineveh—about as far away from the comforts of home as any good Jewish boy could have imagined. And there, like a Lutheran cleric over Montreal, he is strangely out of place as he announces, “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” And, just like what follows in Mark’s gospel, people begin to believe and to repent. No one is more astounded than this prophet thrown up by a fish; this is not at all what he had anticipated.

And then there are those carnal Christians living in Corinth. They are simply going about their business, earning a living in one of the empire’s greatest and most cosmopolitan cities. In fact, they are thoroughly immersed in the pleasures of urban life—up to their elbows in the muck and the mire of Corinthian sports, sex, and satisfaction. If cities in the Roman world were known by their musical beat, Corinth would best be represented by urban techno—characterized by a 4/4 drum kick, a mechanical feel from percussion machines and synthesizers, and lots of repetition in the bass line. Like most of the students I observed at the last college dance, the Corinthians were mesmerized by the entrancing beat of urban Bacchanalia and enjoyed a life of jumping up and down as fast as they could to experience the pleasures of the body. And then, into the dance hall strides the rather morose apostle Paul with his crisp announcement, “brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short. . . the present form of this world is passing away,” (1 Corinthians 7: 29, 31). Had he been a Lutheran with a prayer book decked out in clerical collar, earth tones and earth shoes, he could not have spoken a stranger message to a hip-hop culture.

So, this morning, as we wend our way through the darkness at the heart of the winter season, I would like to challenge you to quit yawning and to stir from your hibernation to ask, to what are we called as disciples of Christ in this season of Epiphany? If this is, indeed, a time dedicated to learning to pay attention to our surroundings, of stirring from our winter lethargy, to what is the Gospel calling us? If the time is now, as all of these texts seem to suggest, what are the choices that face us as we enter into a new calendar year? I would like to suggest that today’s gospel lesson makes at least three demands for those of us who would follow this strange Messiah.

The first demand Jesus makes is that we leave behind all other priorities. It is something of a curiosity that American businesses have no qualms about making such a demand. The story has been told many times of young executives who finally land their hoped-for job with a major company only to be confronted with a boss who tells them that if they expect to move up the corporate ladder they must be willing to set aside all other commitments—church, social involvement, even family—if they wish to make it in the current economic climate. The company demands absolute allegiance—no ifs, ands, or buts.

We like to think of ourselves as a culture of leisure, but the fact remains that for many of us our work actually absorbs more of our time than it did for some previous generations. In the Middle Ages, for instance, people worked about half of the 365 days a year. The rest were festivities,

Sundays, holidays, or just plain rest days. We Protestants saw such behavior as somewhat slothful and not only did away with the Catholic calendar but came increasingly to see our work as the only measure of value. More recently, “several years ago, futurists predicted that, as a result of developing technology and automation, people in the U.S. would have much more leisure in the future. However, a recent survey indicates that since the early 1980s the median number of hours worked by Americans has increased by 20 percent while the amount of leisure time available to the average person has dropped by 32 percent. According to the survey, this trend toward less and less leisure time has been steady and unwavering,” (www.csulb.edu/divisions/students/.../Workbook_Sec3_WPE.doc).

The dilemma that has emerged for Christians in this culture is how to square these realities with Christ’s unwavering call to not reduce the Gospel to a sideshow. How can we find time for church, let alone God, when both we and our spouse have been asked to sell our soul to our jobs? And, perhaps even more insidious and ubiquitous, is the encroachment of technology on what little time and space we had available as family. Some of you may have even seen the recent photograph of the modern American family in which mom and dad sit mesmerized in front of electronic screens, along with the children (including the baby), piled up on a family bed, each in his or her respective corner. Two millennia ago, Christians were called upon to offer sacrifices to the gods and swear an oath of fealty to Caesar. Though the “gods” may have changed, the challenge to our sense of commitment has not. The interesting point that the gospel writer makes in this brief passage is that in both cases with the two sets of brothers, they are shown leaving behind that to which they have given their lives. In the early church, this may have provided a strong sense of consolation for those whose commitment to the new faith required a shift in vocation. Now, while we may not be required or called upon to quit our jobs, we must all be aware of the extent to which we have become entangled in our own “nets” to the point that they have become more important than our service to the Master. Christ is not content with half-hearted Christians who offer only a few morsels of time to him and for his service. He demands not only first place in our hearts but in our lives, as well.

The second challenge posed in Mark’s text is that of learning a new task. In the story before us, we find ourselves on the lake with a bunch of fishermen. Fishing for them was not just a hobby—it was their livelihood. When you are in the business of fishing for a living, you don’t have time to mess around with different lures and the challenge of bringing in the fish. You want quality equipment that will get the job done efficiently in as short a time as possible. That is why they are portrayed as mending their nets. Holes in one’s net can mean a smaller yield and lots of frustration. Jesus comes along and invites them to come and learn a new, but related task: fishing for people.

Now, much has been made of this word that is used for the mending of nets. In fact, the prophet Jeremiah (in chapter 16) suggests that the Lord was sending for many fishermen, while Jesus, himself, makes quite explicit at the beginning of his ministry the need for men and women who can assist in the restoration and mending process. One of the joys during my seminary days was the chance to meet a number of second-career people who were coming

into preparation for the ministry from a variety of other jobs and professions. In one of my classes, I sat next to a former dentist and a CPA. Both brought tremendous experience to their classroom work and spoke of how their particular background helped prepare them for their new calling. Or, even more recently, Thursday's Post-Dispatch told the story of one of the founding members of the heavy-metal band, Megadeth, one David Elefson, who is currently enrolled in Concordia Seminary's new online theological program. Within three years, he hopes to be approved for ordination in the Lutheran church. Apparently, he heard the call that Pastor Joe issued from this pulpit last Sunday!

Martin Luther, himself, was something of a visionary when it came to this idea of call. For him, our vocation is to be seen as a means of service to God. Part of our struggle is in trying to carve out enough time from our so-called "secular" world for "sacred" purposes. But God also has a way of taking our background and experience and putting it to work for the sake of the Kingdom as we are called into the business of mending and repairing people who have been battered by the storms of life. Jesus knew that he would need a variety of different kinds of people who would bring a variety of skills to the formation of the early church. Included in that group were these fishermen. The extraordinary thing was the transformation Jesus was able to work in them to smooth out the rough edges so that they could mobilize the infant church. That process began with their call to learn a new task—something to which we may be called to in this new year.

And, finally, comes a call to follow Jesus unreservedly. Jesus' invitation was short and direct: "Come, follow me." A number of years ago now, our family vacationed in the Colorado Rockies where we visited one of our friends at Bear Trap Ranch, an InterVarsity camp near Colorado Springs. The day we arrived was a kind of "crazy day," in which a number of teams competed in several different events of a somewhat demented nature. One of those activities was an obstacle course over which a wheelbarrow had to be pushed by someone who was hindered slightly by being blindfolded. A teammate was allowed to sit in the wheelbarrow (at his or her own risk) and to give directions. The results, as one might expect, were absolutely hilarious. Some went the wrong way, while others deposited their passengers on the ground. Without slowing down, paying close attention to directions, and demonstrating trust in the one positioned in front, the course could simply not be completed.

This illustration perhaps comes close to something of the "blind trust" to which Jesus called those first disciples. They were called upon to leave behind all prior commitments. Perhaps Paul captures something of this life of risk and adventure in today's epistle lesson when he says, "let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it," (1 Corinthians 7:29-30). Such a way of living requires one to follow Jesus open-endedly and unreservedly.

One of the down-sides of the economic recession of the last few years is that it has perhaps made us more risk-averse in our thinking and behavior. We know, for instance, that it has slowed mobility in our country—both physically, as fewer people choose to move, and socially and economically, as the gap between rich and poor has widened and opportunities for advancement have been reduced. Some have worked voraciously to reduce risk in their retirement and pension accounts, hoping to minimize the risk of failure. Stanley Hauerwas and others have even pointed out that nowhere can this risk-aversion be seen quite so tellingly as in our denial of death and willingness to pull out all the stops—even when treatment for a terminal illness may be a long-shot. As Americans, we simply refuse to admit failure, even when it comes to our mortality. The difficulty, of course, is that, try as hard as we might to exert complete control over our lives, some things simply refuse to come under our jurisdiction.

All of this brings us right back to two of the scripture passages for this morning. I hardly think that “minimizing risks” would define the life of discipleship to which we are being called. Simon and Andrew are pictured as leaving behind their nets and James and John as leaving behind their father. This was their familiar world. These were their roots—their comfortable space. If anything characterizes the response of the disciples it is one of total abandonment, of refusing the philosophy of “minimizing risks” and cashing it in for a life of exciting pilgrimage. Today’s gospel lesson confronts us front and center with the challenge of a life in which we put the call of Christ first in our lives. It demands that we learn a new, but related, task of serving others, and it always means following Jesus unreservedly.

Most mornings when I come in to work I follow the same path and, when the wind blows cold, I oftentimes keep my head down for protection. And there I can be seen plodding along at a hurried pace, anxious to get inside and to get on with the day. So it was that on Wednesday morning I found myself walking along that same care-worn path, worried about all of the things I had to do that day. I am something of an obsessive list-maker so I was ticking off in my head the “to-do” list one-by-one, not noticing what was around me. And then it was that I looked up to see the rosy-fingered dawn lighting up the eastern sky in front of me. It was glorious beyond words; brilliant in every sense. And yet—I had almost missed it, I was so concentrated on the busyness of life. And so, I invite you to join me in this Epiphany season of lifting up your head and looking for God’s majesty and listening for God’s voice in the everyday and ordinary. If our calling is to not get so wrapped up in the vagaries of life in the nets that so encumber us, what would God say to us through the light of a new dawn? To what might God be calling us? May we not only have the wisdom to learn to pay attention, but to also respond positively like those first disciples to whatever new Kingdom purposes God may be calling us.