

Last week in our gospel reading, Nathanael got a very personal invitation from his friend Phillip and individual recognition from Jesus. But this week, Jesus doesn't have Phillip's personal touch and there's no individual invitation or special validation. Jesus is wholly general in his request: "Follow me," he says. Mark gives us the names of these first followers: Simon and his brother Andrew, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, but in Jesus' speech, there's no individualism. He simply "called them."

These disciples are not called singularly, and they are do not leave alone. Jesus extends the invitation to more than one of them at once. In pairs, two by two, Jesus calls, and these men follow. And Jesus tells them that he'll make them into the kinds of people who will call more people, who will invite a greater number and recruit a crowd. Jesus calls to his followers solely in the context of community. The only odd one out is poor Daddy Zebedee, left in the boat with the hired hands.

Simon and Andrew, James and John all follow Jesus together. But once they go following, they don't get to choose their companions. Jesus doesn't give them the option to decide who gets to follow and who gets left behind. That kind of choosy attitude is what tripped up Jonah.

In Jonah's story today we hear that the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. But it also came to him a first time, telling him to go to city of Nineveh and call its inhabitants to repentance. But Jonah doesn't want to do it. He doesn't like Ninevites. Doesn't want to touch them with a ten-foot pole. Because Nineveh is the enemy. They're the oppressor. The

antagonizer. The North Korea of the ancient near East. And Jonah doesn't want Nineveh in the number.

But refusing to invite the Ninevites doesn't work out too well for Jonah. Because he isn't the one who gets to choose, he flees. Then he gets caught in a giant sea-storm, thrown overboard from the boat he's in, and swallowed by a large fish. He alternates between sulking and praying, after three days the fish vomits him up onto dry land, where the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time, at the start of our reading today.

This time Jonah goes to Nineveh, but half-heartedly. He should walk around the whole city, but he only goes a third. And if he's a prophet, his message to the people should be lengthy and dramatic and full of judgments and images of peril and inspire people to repent by reminding them of God's love and mercy. Jonah's speech in Nineveh should be along the lines of Isaiah's "Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion and their sins!" but all Jonah says is, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

Jonah's half-baked speech defies standards of good prophetic rhetoric. He is hardly delivering a compelling message and does nothing to pull at the Ninevites heartstrings. But it works. God's word nonetheless punches through Jonah's ineffective messaging. The Ninevites come to the Lord. They fast and humble themselves and turn around their lives and God decides not to destroy them.

Their unlikely inclusion in God's grace leaves Jonah fuming. He gets angry at God for saving his enemy. Jonah becomes mad that God included Nineveh in salvation's crowd, when he wanted to keep them out.

Ironically, then Book of Jonah the ends with the incompetent prophet left out: sitting all by himself outside the city without even a bush for company. Jonah would rather to limit God's grace, so he ends up alone.

Jonah folly wasn't the big fish. It was the fallacy that he thought he could do God's work alone. Yes, God sent him alone as a prophet with a solitary message. But he mistakenly saw himself as separate from the people God called him to serve. Jonah didn't think he needed the people God put in his path, and he was mad that didn't get to choose his company.

How often do we make Jonah's mistake? How often do we think we can do this Jesus-thing, this life of discipleship, on our own? But God gives us others, and we don't get to pick-and-choose our company either. God made us to be interdependent beings, relying on others, and living in relationship. Even God's Son needed others, for he was born in a stable where his family relied on the kindness of an innkeeper. And interdependence is one of the main messages of our season of Epiphany: that the revelation of God's Son by a star doesn't just come to one wise man but many magi. And the revealing of God's Son at the Jordan River isn't just for John but for many. And through the manifestation of God's son, the nations--plural--come to know God's glory.

For if we are to follow Jesus, we are going to need and going to have companions.

“Companion.” A word, I learned this week, that literally means, “bread fellow”. “Com” - comes from the Latin ‘together with’ along with “panis” - Latin for ‘bread.’ If we are to follow Jesus, we are going to need and are going to get people with whom we share bread. Folks with whom we break our bread. Other voices to join ours as we give thanks to God for the bread.

Like Jonah, we may think we can strike out alone. We may think we’re better off by ourselves. We may not like to ask for help. We may consider that God’s responsibilities are MY responsibilities rather than an opportunity to seek companionship with other people. But all that would be our fallacy. God’s grace is wider than we can ever imagine, and Jesus’ Invitation is broader than we can understand. For everything towards which God calls us involves a deeper relationship with God and deeper relationships with other people.

So, it’s a good thing that Jesus’ invitation isn’t individual. Its good news is that Jesus uses an all-encompassing “Follow me.” For then it includes Simon and Andrew and James and John and also Mary and Mary Magdalene and Salome. It includes you and for me. Because God’s mission loves company. It needs company. God’s call loves and needs people to share its bread. God’s mission needs you and me. AMEN.

Rev. Kathryn L. Pocalyko

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Lutheran Church of Our Saviour

Psalms 62:5-12

North Chesterfield, Virginia

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

January 21, 2018

Mark 1:14-20

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

