

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 22, 2012
Lessons: Jonah 3:1-10 and Mark 1:14-20

CALLED TO FOLLOW

The questions we ask of life greatly affect the answers we find in it. Consider these three:

- What do I want for myself?
- What does God want for me?
- What does God want for them, meaning the others life puts before me – the people whose lives I touch or whose needs touch me? The Bible calls them my neighbors.

We all ask that first question, “What do I want for myself?” because it comes to us quite naturally as a matter first of survival. It is built into the infant to cry for what is needed, what is felt to be missing, what requires attention. Many people in this world are so poor that their survival is endangered every day of their lives, and so what they want for themselves is what they need to live. For people born to at least some level of privilege and opportunity, the question advances toward prosperity. From the infant’s cries to the child’s many wishes, prayers, and requests and on to the adult’s consideration of prospects and choices, we ask all our lives what we want for ourselves. It’s not a bad question wrong to ask, and some people may even need to ask it more often and more forcefully so life and other people stop pushing them around, but neither is it a good enough question to make us the people we are created to become.

Unless I ask of life some higher, better question, I will get stuck in self-centered thinking and self-absorbed living. I suspect that many highly successful people reach their heights of prosperity and influence by asking that first question relentlessly – “What do I want for myself?” – and because they keep asking that question day after day and year after year, they attain more and acquire more than people who let comforts, entertainments, or concern for others distract them from the pursuit of their goals.

What I want for myself can also become a religious question looking for a divine source of personal satisfaction, comfort, and advancement. The self desires security, good health, assurances against misfortune, help with keeping what it has and gaining more, and relief from any guilt about the ways it has gone about getting what it has desired. So, what

better ally could the self possibly have in its pursuit of its goals than God? Not surprisingly, in times when religious faith and practice have been generally accepted as part of the package of respectability and upward mobility, religion has flourished. Those of us old enough to remember the 1950's and early '60's have lived through one of those times when it was fashionable to be church-going; we are not living in such a time now.

If and when we come to it and don't run away like Jonah, the second question awakens us to a new and very different way of looking at life and thinking about ourselves as persons. "What does God want for me?" What does God want me to do, and what kind of person does God want me to become? Human life is not just a matter of doing and acquiring; it is a matter of becoming. "Practice makes perfect," we say, but practice can also make selfish, irritable, and resentful. Or just bored and restless.

Sometimes it takes a failure or two or three to move us toward this life-changing question for real. I say, "for real," because we human beings are masters of self-deception, and I can easily fool myself into thinking that what I want is exactly what God wants for me, but then the call comes. How does the call come? There is no predictable answer. Who can say how God will interrupt your life or mine? God works in many ways, and God knows where you are in life and where I am much better than we know ourselves.

I am not a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, but in a sense I am, and so are you. I think that's why, when I asked others in our presbytery what hymns in the Presbyterian Hymnal their congregations liked best, our next hymn showed up on everybody's list. "O Lord, with Your eyes You have searched me, And while smiling, have called out my name. Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me, Now with You I will seek other seas." Actually, it says in its original Spanish, "another sea," which doesn't fit the meter in English, but I like the idea that Christ has a place in mind, and we're not just traveling around. His call will lead somewhere.

How can we know what God wants for us? The knowledge of God is embodied for us in Jesus. To know God as God truly is toward us, I seek to know Jesus as he was and is toward me. He will call me and lead me from my old self to a new self. He will challenge my assumptions, beliefs, and prejudices. He will make me uncomfortable where I thought I had been quite satisfied, but he will also give me hope where I had already closed the doors of my mind and heart to expectation. I may ask what I am gaining to my benefit, but he will ask me what kind of person I am becoming. God cares far less about how much I acquire or achieve than about who and what I am and how much progress I am making toward growing into the person God created me to become. As I keep asking what God wants for me, I come to realize our prayer, "Thy will be done," expresses hope and desire for change, not resignation to fate. The God who intends to make all things new will make me new, also.

The same is true for a church – a congregation of people drawn together by their faith in Jesus Christ. What kind of church do we want to be? We could make a list of our aspirations and desires, starting (no doubt) with more people joining us. But at some point or many points, in some way or many smaller ways, Jesus will interrupt and change the question by calling to us anew, “Follow me.” Then he will make the question, “What kind of church does God want us to be, and what does Christ call us to do and to become?”

Biblically, faith is a response to being called. Faith is not a matter of feeling secure where I am in life and so content to stay there and hope nothing changes very much to disturb me. Jesus does not come to tell us, “Stay where you are and as you are, and be content.” He calls, “Follow me.” You and I and we together as a church, he calls to follow him. Faith comes with leaving our boats, so to speak, and going with him into something new he has in mind for us. The move may not be literal in the sense of packing up and heading off to some geographical location. Shifting from, “What do I want for myself?” to “What does God want for me?” will change my location even if I stay in the same locale because I will come to see everything around me differently and to respond in new ways.

The third question is necessary but requires both trust and care. Above all, it requires compassion and humility. “What does God want for them?” – those other people, my neighbors in the neighborhood or in the world. Jesus tells his first-called disciples who have lived by fishing for fish that now they will fish for people because God loves those people and they need God’s grace in many different ways.

Notice, please, that the issue is not what people want for themselves, which would make me a slave to their demands; neither is the issue what I want for them, which would make them slaves to my demands. The question is, “What does God want for them?” and we need to take great care not to take charge of the answer. It’s bad enough to impose my will upon another person, but even worse to impose “God’s will” upon people. For this reason, Jesus warns his followers never to step up into the position of master but to remain always the servant who wants the best for others but dares not presume to know what is best for them or try to control their choices.

We grow as we move from, “What do I want for myself?” to “What does God want for me?” Other people grow in the same way, even though their stories are much different from ours. We serve Jesus Christ as by compassion and humility we enable others, perhaps, to begin asking that second question of what God wants for them. Many have never been able to believe God actually wanted anything for them or cared at all what became of them and their lives. Jesus calls us to be the living answer that, yes, God cares, so others may ask the question with hope. Amen.