

CALLED TO FISH

A sermon by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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I was looking through some pictures of Moncton at the turn of the century that Phyllis Perry shared with me when I came across a picture of what the downtown looked like. There were street car rails down the middle of the street. The telephone poles show a move forward into the future; however, beside them are still the horses and buggies that people still depended on for transportation. Absent are the restaurants, the coffee shops, the trees, the office buildings over five stories, the pavement, and walking along the sidewalks are women and men going about their business dressed in the traditional clothes of that era: hats and black cloaks. In some ways, one wouldn't even know it was Moncton in that picture because times have changed so much.

This was the world that Monseur Shaban came to when he left Damascus and the Middle East for Beersville, New Brunswick and eventually Moncton. This was a strange place to him. We can imagine how much he missed his friends, the smells and sounds that were familiar to him, his Muslim faith community, having left behind any concept of home, as he journeyed with his parents. It was a time when people came here to Moncton and Dieppe in search of something better, much like they do today. Like today, it was a place of hope where people could either start their own business or find employment and carve out a life for themselves. For Monseur, it was the former. After his family moved down from Beersville, and after meeting his beloved Fatima, Monseur opened a grocery store near Pearl and Lewis Street. One can imagine how difficult it must have been for them to start from nothing, and work hard day and night. Of course, it wasn't all work: they managed to find time to have seven children!

On Friday, I buried the last of their surviving children, Mary Lee. Mary Lee married a soldier from Britain who was Church of England. He couldn't have been farther from what Fatima and Monseur expected for a son-in-law; however, they grew to love Ted despite the mixture of race and religion.

I like their story for that reason alone; however, I like it for several other reasons too. When the Shabans came to Moncton, they met and were welcomed by Frank Archibald, minister of this church at that time, and because of his care and the way he shared stories, they became part of this church despite never leaving behind their Muslim faith. They simply gathered in this place with other children of the Abrahamic faiths and prayed as a community.

Mary and Ted took over the grocery store, and people said that they preferred to buy their groceries from Mary because of her kindness and gentleness, although she had another side, which a robber discovered one day when he told her to empty the till. Instead, she only gave him a few dollars, said she wouldn't call the police, and told him to "get the hell out!"

Mary was known, in her quiet way, to help people as she was able. She took compassion on children who were in need, especially if they were hungry or needed some clothing, and she made bologna sandwiches for guys who were down on their luck. There was no Karing Kitchen during those times, so people depended on one another, with their large families and work that didn't pay a lot.

Discipleship isn't always about the grand statements of ministry or the very public good that we do. It's more often than not about the things you do for people when no one else really knows. We serve our God in ways we can't begin to imagine when we offer ourselves in the service of others in whatever place in which we may find ourselves.

And rather than sit in judgement of people or a situation, it becomes our task as disciples, as followers of Jesus, to wonder

how it is we can make a difference and to leave the situation in a better place than where we found it. I don't think we are called to solve every problem, though. Sometimes faithful service is just sitting beside someone in their distress. If God's mind can be changed about things, so can ours, right?

It's that one sentence in Jonah that makes me smile, "God changed his mind." So often we are led to believe that every moment of every day of every month of every year of our lives is prescribed for us. "You will break your leg in 2013." What this says to me, though, is more about God being with us all of our lives as opposed to authoring every moment. "But God doesn't give you anything more than you can handle..." people will say. I couldn't disagree more. I don't think it's about God "giving" us something that will "test your faith." I think it's about being human beings in a world that in which the laws of physics are applied, and where we find ourselves sometimes in need of the love and prayers of other people who, because of their common weakness, are strong.

Jonah wasn't too particularly happy about the ministry he was given: to go to the people of Nineveh and tell people to change, or else.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that she has this image of him rolling into town, putting up a big tent, sprinkling sawdust on the ground, arranging the benches, and spreading the word about a big revival meeting. Thousands show up; even the king is there in his purple robes. Jonah pulls out his white handkerchief, clears his throat, and speaks into the microphone, with one hand holding his big black Bible and the other shaking his finger in the air: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown."

I heard a story about another preacher who tried that kind of a sermon. The church fired their pastor because every week he stood behind the pulpit and told them they were all going to hell. So they got rid of him and got another preacher. One of the church members was telling a friend about him. "He's great.

Nothing like the other guy who told us we were all going to hell; you should come here him.”

So his friend goes to hear him. After the service the friend says, “I don’t get it. You fired the other guy because he told you, that you are going to hell. But this guy said you’re going to hell.” The church member replied, “Yeah, I know, but he seems genuinely sorry about it.”

As we heard with the children this morning, we all seem to know the story of Jonah; or, as they said, “That guy that was swallowed by a whale.” We all know a few details. It was written about 400 years before Jesus, and the author puts the story in a time roughly 400 years before that. Jonah hears a voice telling him to go to Nineveh, which was known as the sin-city of the area.

Jonah’s response is to board the next ship for Tarshish, which happens to be a port city on the coast of Spain - about as far away from Nineveh as he can go.

There’s something about the idea of being in the belly of a whale that catches the imagination: a dark place where we are being consumed. And it says that even in that place, God can deliver us where we need to be, or to do what we need to do, even if it’s the last thing on our mind. I don’t think that the story of Jonah is factual; however, I do believe it’s true.

A little girl was talking to her teacher about whales. The teacher said it was physically impossible for a whale to swallow a human because even though it was a very large mammal its throat was very small. The little girl noted that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Irritated, the teacher reiterated that a whale could not swallow a human; it was physically impossible.

The little girl said, "When I get to heaven I will ask Jonah."

The teacher asked, "What if Jonah went to hell?"

The little girl replied, "Then you ask him!"

God loves those whom we have not brought ourselves to love. The translation of this text from the Greek obscures part of Jesus' call to the disciples. "I will make you fish for people" in the Greek text is better translated as, "I will make you become fishers." The difference is that the first translation makes it sound as if Jesus is calling us to a task, to a job. The Greek makes clearer that he is calling them to a new identity. It isn't so much that they have one more new job to do, but that the whole identity of their lives have changed - to fish, to heal, to love, to care, to reach out, to believe.

"God has a job for each of us. It may be a job for which you are paid money. But it also may be a job outside the way you earn your living. God summons each one of us to faithfulness, to lives of generous and compassionate commitment. There is work for each of us to do. James Forbes calls it "our project." Each of us has a project: preaching sermons, healing people, establishing justice, passing laws, maintaining the city, writing the truth, defending the nation, nurturing, teaching, caring for the children, creating and maintaining a home, building a church. It may be public; it may be quiet and private. It may be a profession; it may be a volunteer job. But God has a project for each of us, and there is no more important task in life than identifying it, acknowledging it, doing it, and thanking God for the great privilege and honour and blessing of it.

Jesus calls Simon and Andrew, and they drop what they are doing and follow him. Sometimes it's that simple: you hear a voice, feel a tug on your heart, you turn around and follow. And sometimes it is a lifelong struggle to follow and be faithful, a quiet, steady faithfulness that expresses itself in modest, almost invisible, ways." (John Buchanan)

God calls us, and the journey of faith begins when deep in our hearts we say yes.