

## Wesley United Methodist Church

January 21, 2018

“Follow Me.”

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Mark 1:14-21

Some of you older football fans may remember when Bo Schembechler was the coach of the Michigan Wolverines. It is said that Schembechler used to work his players especially hard during spring practice to see what kind of young men he had, winners or quitters. He made a sign with a slogan on it, and hung it above the locker room door. The sign read like this: “Those who stay will be champions.” Of course, not everyone stayed. One morning Schembechler came to the office and looked at the sign. Underneath the words “Those who stay will be champions” someone had written, “And those who quit will be doctors, lawyers, and captains of industry.” Not everyone has what it takes to answer the call to be champions, regardless of the field of profession.

Well, you get the idea. Not everyone is out to play football. And not everyone was called among Jesus’ original twelve disciples. Read Mark 1:14-21

It is very difficult to think that there is anything special about these men that Jesus called except their willingness to serve.

God came to a man named Jonah and told him to go to Nineveh, a wicked city, and “preach against it because its wickedness has come up before me.” In other words, his assigned task was to proclaim God’s judgment on Nineveh’s sins. But, Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the historic enemy of Israel. In the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., the Assyrians plundered Palestine, looted and burned its cities and deported its inhabitants. In 722 – 721 B.C., it was Assyria that destroyed the Northern Kingdom.

Jonah hated the Assyrians, and so when God came to him and told him to preach to the people of Nineveh, Jonah went in the opposite direction. He boarded a ship traveling westward, bound for Tarshish on the coast of Spain, at the opposite end of the known world. He was fleeing from his calling; he was fleeing from the Lord. Of course, Jonah did not understand that God is a universal God from whom there is no escape.

You have probably heard sermons before from the book of Jonah on the uselessness of running from God. Yet we all do it at some time in our lives. We don’t board ships. We do it with our minds and hearts. We tune God out. We ignore the voice that calls us to serve our neighbor, serve the church, serve our God.

That’s no little thing, is it? Jesus calls many, but only a few heed his summons. In most churches, only about twenty percent of the congregation is really involved in the life of the church. Another twenty percent are relatively faithful in worship, but can’t truly be counted on for anything else. Another twenty percent are sporadic attenders. And then there are about forty percent who are of the hatched, matched and dispatched variety. That is, they are here when they need to be baptized, married, and finally buried—hatched, matched, dispatched. So, the fact that these first disciples were willing to not only say “yes” to the Master, but also to leave their nets and follow him is no little matter. As they say, “showing up is half the battle.”

There was an interesting article in National Geographic some time ago about the Mbuti men of central Africa, also known as Pygmies. These small people have a unique way of making music and reinforcing special bonds. The men whittle musical pipes that can play an A flat; another may whittle a pipe that plays a D, another an F sharp.

Because each man can only play one note, all the men must work together to create music. If one man is missing from the group, the music is noticeably different, lacking in harmony and richness that results when all are playing together.

What a great metaphor for the church. Imagine that every member of our fellowship had a flute that played one note. The only way we can produce a symphony would be if every member shows up and does his or her part.

There wasn’t anything special that we can see about these early disciples except that when the Master said, “Follow Me,” they followed. Having said that, though, we must acknowledge that being around Jesus turned them into very special people. That’s not surprising, is it? Jesus has been turning people’s lives around for twenty centuries now.

God called Jonah to go and preach to the people of Nineveh, what happened? We know the story. He ran away from God, boarded a ship and thought he was safe... The ship encountered a vicious storm and was tossed about on the waves like a toy. The winds and the waves were so fierce that seasoned sailors begged their gods for mercy. They cast lots in order to determine who the gods were angry with. “Tell us who is responsible for making all this trouble for us?” they prayed. Of course, the lot fell on Jonah and he fessed up that he was running from God. He ended up being thrown over board and the raging sea grew calm. God appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah, and he was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Can you imagine what he looked like? Did you ever have a band-aid on a finger for several days and when you take it off your skin is white and shriveled up? Imagine that was what Jonah looked like.

Anyway, it is interesting to note that Jesus once referred to the story of Jonah. Remember how he told skeptics that the only sign that they should receive would be the sign of Jonah? Christ would emerge from the ground on the third day after his crucifixion just as Jonah had emerged from the belly of the fish.

We all know the story up to this point. The big fish can no longer stomach Jonah after three days and coughs him up on dry land alive and well. At this point God came to Jonah a second time and told him again to go and preach to Nineveh. And this time Jonah was in no mood to argue. So, he went to Nineveh and preached like he had never preached before. And something amazing happened, "The people of Nineveh believed God."

How often do we run in the other direction when God calls us? How often do we refuse to share God's love with someone else because it may be inconvenient or we don't like them? How often do we ignore his pleading to call or visit someone, realizing that it is too late when we stand in front of a casket? We may be the only one to share God's grace with them and we run in the other direction? What an awesome responsibility and guilt if we disobey that call.

Not so Jesus' disciples. When Jesus called them they were ordinary people, he said, "Follow Me," and they followed. Christ reaches out to all kinds of people. It can happen to us. We don't have to be special people, he turns us into special people. All we have to do is say, "Yes."