

# Heeding God's Call

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Psalm 62:5-12  
Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
Mark 1:14-20

Heeding God's call. The call came from my friend Weldon in Seattle. "Are you going to the Peace Gathering in Philadelphia? I'll be there." I had heard about the gathering, but frankly it scared me. It sounded too intense, too elite (you couldn't just sign up, you had to be invited by your denominational leaders). A week sounded like too much time away from the family and the congregation. But the call was persistent and audible in the voice of Weldon. (And my excuses were flimsy; I did get invited by the powers that be.) So with details arranged for housing, childcare, Adam in charge at church and the prospect of seeing old friends and young relatives, I decided to go to Philadelphia.

My agenda was mostly connecting with Weldon and other Mennonites who might want to sign the Open Letter that Weldon and I have been working on. I knew the week would be intense but I had my heart and head in check. I even had a John Grisham book on CD to distract me on the way there and back.

Then Jenny Dillon called. "Know anyone that is going to that Peace Gathering: Heeding God's Call? I am looking for a ride." *There goes John Grisham*, I thought. "Sure I can give you a ride. We leave tomorrow morning at 8:30."

Thus began my week of Heeding God's Call.

The gathering (and the planners were quite intentional about calling this a gathering not a conference) was a week of praying and listening, learning and singing and talking with 300 other people. Convened by Quakers, Mennonites and Church of the Brethren, the gathering included people from at least 20 other Christian denominations, as well as a few Jews and Muslims.

As I had feared, it was intense. There was preaching twice a day and some silence Quaker style (though not enough). Workshops ranged from "using

hip-hop as a tool for non-violent resistance” to “how to preach peace without starting a war in your congregation” to “building peace through interfaith dialogue and action.” There were daily small groups for processing as well as groups to figure out how we were going to work on peace and justice issues when we go home. And around the edges — bits of time to connect with other peacemakers.

At each plenary session we received briefs from those who were working for peace on the street. People from the gathering, as well as folks from a local interfaith group, held daily protests in front of a neighboring gun shop with the intention that the owner would sign a voluntary code of conduct relating to how and who he sells guns to. It is a fairly limited code, even Walmart, the largest gun seller in the U.S. has signed it. So for four days people went to his store, asking him to reconsider signing. And when he did not, they stayed to pray or block entrance to the store, and people were arrested.

I confess part of me felt sorry for this man, who at my father’s age, had these crazy peace activists bugging him at his store all week. On the other hand, local religious leaders had been in conversation with him for a number of months, trying to get him to sign the code of conduct. He chose to work with the NRA rather than take this small step toward getting guns out of the hands of criminals and off the street.

But these are the details. It is easy for me to get caught up in the details. The more important story is the way I think I have been changed by answering God’s call to go to Philadelphia. The “gathering” evaluation asked, “How did you experience the Spirit’s movement at the gathering and what will that mean as you return home?”

The experience for me was one that I cherish as well as wonder at, even cringe at a bit. Is it really necessary to feel on the verge of tears all week? To be wiping my eyes in every last worship service, crying through the music and even some of the preaching? I mean, does the Spirit really work that way or was I just overtired from non-stop meetings and the lack of fresh fruits and vegetables?

Does it truly make a difference to be in a gathering that has been so bathed in prayer, where you see a woman with arms outstretched standing in

silent prayer through the whole worship service? Is this what brings the spirit close, what allows my heart to open and be changed?

Or was it the Quaker tradition of silence that punctuated our gathering in a way that is unusual in Mennonite worship. Perhaps the Spirit seemed near because we sang so many spirituals and songs born from pain; songs brought forth in a culture that has held out hope for generations when it seemed there was no earthly reason to hope. One song became a refrain throughout the week.

*Yes, Yes, Yes - sing*

As the week went on and the tune became more familiar, we sang with energy and gusto. Until the last evening when we sang this song and a visiting African American pastor remarked, “We sing that song in our church too, but it is more of a moan.”

And perhaps that is how it is in heeding God’s call. We know what we ought to do. We hear the call of God, but the yes is so hard. We say yes. We know the answer should be yes, but given the circumstances we really mean “maybe.” We really mean, “Well, I guess so.” Or like Jonah, “Do I have to? Okay, if you insist.”

We only heard a snippet of the Jonah story this morning, the most positive verses in the whole story — when Jonah finally says yes. But remember how it all begins. Jonah is called by God to go to evil Nineveh and he runs away! He is probably afraid that the wickedness will rub off on him. He heads in the opposite direction. Getting as far away from God as he can imagine, he goes to the seaside and boards a boat. When a storm comes and the boat is in danger of capsizing Jonah is forced to admit that he is running away from God. It is at this point that he remembers that his God is the God of land **and sea**. He cannot run away. So he asks to be thrown into the sea, right into the water which God rules.

Then comes our favorite part of the story; Jonah is saved by being swallowed by a huge fish. From inside the fish Jonah prays and prays (and I suppose fasts as well.) After three days he is burped up onto the sand. Then God calls a second time with instructions to go to Nineveh. This time Jonah goes. He walks all across that vast city, telling of the coming doom if they do not repent.

He preaches and preaches and by gum, the people listen. Even the king is on board, imposing prayer and fasting upon everyone.

Jonah changed direction and went to preach to Nineveh.

The people of Nineveh changed their minds and followed the God of Jonah.

And God? God's mind is changed too and God does not destroy Nineveh.

But Jonah has not really changed. He may be worn down from all that time in the fish, but he is not at all enthused when Nineveh is saved from doom. Jonah doesn't like the *repentant* Ninevites any more than he liked the *wicked* Ninevites. He is only minimally concerned with their salvation.

With all that Jonah has been through — the storm, the fish, preaching an effective repentance sermon — it looks like Jonah followed God's call but he hasn't changed. Jonah complains that God would change and save this city. Jonah's interest remains his own perception of justice and the Ninevites do not deserve it.

It is hard work being with people who are different from us. Jonah couldn't do it. In fact, we don't really do it all that well. Especially on Sundays. We gravitate toward worship with people who look like us, who have similar backgrounds, who have the same understanding of God and the same beliefs that we do. The statistics on diversity in churches are dismal. Though we legally integrated our schools, work places and restaurants decades ago, our houses of worship remain segregated largely along racial and economic lines.

And yet we as Christians follow a man who called **all** people to himself. Jesus was a magnet for people who were not like him. He preached in the city, healed in the countryside, fed people on the mountains and taught at the seaside. And he had compassion on those from whom he should have kept his distance.

I suppose one could try to make the case that like Jonah, Jesus ran away. Immediately after his baptism he went to the wilderness for 40 days. But this was not running away from God. It was a "vision quest;" it was a time to get clear about his life and what he to was to be about. The wilderness experience was a

time of seeking the next steps, perhaps even strategizing. Certainly it was a time of prayer and preparing himself for what was to come. Jesus is the polar opposite of Jonah.

The reading from Mark's gospel of Jesus calling the disciples from their fishing nets, is so familiar — it's tempting to discount it. But I heard this story with new ears last week in Philadelphia. Ched Myers helped us understand in a new way what was going on when Jesus called to these ordinary fishermen. Before Rome was on the scene, fishing had been a good living. Self-sufficiency was the name of the game. But when the empire took over, the fishermen had to purchase leases so they could fish in the Sea of Galilee where their families had always fished; then their catch was taxed and a processing fee imposed. Then almost all of the fish were prepared for transport and export with additional tolls and fees; fishing was no longer an easy living. These formerly independent business people slid down to the bottom of the economic ladder.

When Jesus comes along and invites them to leave their nets and join his nonviolent revolution, his traveling rabbinical school, they drop their nets. They don't have much to lose. But Jesus widens the circle. In Mark chapter 2 he invites Levi to join the group. Levi is one of **those** who works for the empire; he **sells** fishing leases. I imagine Simon, Andrew and the sons of Zebedee did not readily accept him. But they are all invited to sit down with Jesus at Levi's table to eat; the members of this disparate group all become followers of Jesus. Ched Myers likens this to the way that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. worked for change not only with the college educated but was rallying with garbage workers in Memphis on the eve of his murder.

*Yes ,yes, yes - sing*

As a child and a young person I always heard that following Jesus was hard, that we should take up our cross, that we might be led to places we did not want to go. And last week at the gathering there was a fair amount of talk about getting out of our comfort zones. I have tended to discard this kind of language as emotionally and spiritually manipulative. When the preacher asks for hands of those who are going to give their life over to Jesus I close my eyes and look

pious. But in my head I am loudly saying, “You can’t control me, you can’t make me do this. LA LA LA LA LA.”

But this time, in this season of my life, my heart was opened. In Philadelphia I heard the gospel with new ears. It didn’t seem so much power trip or manipulation as an invitation to new relationships. It was less an invitation to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and more an invitation to personal relationships with my neighbors. Maybe it is just me coming to grips with middle age or maybe it is all the political talk about change. But it seems like my head and my heart understand in a new way that if there is going to be any change I have to — I want to — be part of it.

I want to stop being the quiet in the land, the quiet in the city. It is time to reach out to those who are not like me, to find out what it means to be a follower with those who might look different or believe differently, or come from a different zip code or tax bracket. It is not enough to preach about diversity, I have to find ways to make it real in my life.

It is one thing to say that, it is another thing to live it out. And now that I have said this publicly what am I going to do about it? This week I have two pastorly opportunities to put this into practice. Tuesday I will attend a breakfast with pastors from churches in the area that support CUCE, Congregations United for Compassion and Empowerment. We will gather to see how we can support each other and how we can respond to issues in our community. This is not an easy group for me. I can get judgmental and self-righteous, angry and impatient. Sometimes preachers really like to hear themselves talk. Pray for me.

The second opportunity is also an invitation to you. A small group of us from local Mennonite churches has planned a gathering to be held here at Hyattsville this coming Saturday at 4 p.m. We have invited the local Mennonite and Brethren churches to gather, to get to know each other, to worship and eat and talk about how we might work together for peace and justice in the capital area. On the face of it this seems easy. But in reality there is a tremendous amount of diversity even among Anabaptists — diversity in theology, biblical interpretation, culture, worship style, race, class, perceived mission and on and

on. Will we even be able to communicate with each other? Can we find commonality in working for peace? More immediately, does anyone have any interest or time for such a project? Will anyone show up?

So why do I share this intimate spiritual learning, and its accompanying questions, with you? Frankly I am not sure I should. I am still trying to make sense of it myself. But this will be hard work for me, to reach out to those who are different, to struggle to articulate my own beliefs and listen to those who may believe differently. It is hard enough to have genuine relationships with those who are like us. But to step out and be open to relationships with those who are different is even more risky. I realize that many of you do this every day in your work places, in your personal lives. I applaud you and I look to you for help and guidance, for wisdom and accountability.

I share this because if I am actually able to stretch “beyond my comfort zone,” it may impact my work here with you. How might we as a worshipping and serving community be more deliberate in our diversity? Or what would it look like for us to engage in conversations with the local synagogue? I don’t have preconceived ideas (okay, not too many) about what this will mean for us as a congregation. Maybe some of you also will feel similar nudges and we can work together.

The Sunday before I went to Philadelphia, Adam spoke about baptism. He reminded us that the gift in baptism is turning toward, rising toward something new. I am grateful that even 33 years after my baptism the Spirit still speaks, showing me new ways to understand and respond to the story of Jesus.

May we all listen for God’s call, whether in the voice of our friends or family, a stranger, a dream or the scripture. And may we reach out to each other, walking together as we respond and follow in the way of Jesus.