

The best parts of Jonah's call aren't told in this selection! God calls Jonah and tells him to go to the wicked city of Nineveh. He runs in the opposite direction. He gets thrown off a boat. He is rescued by being swallowed by a great fish and then spit out on the shore. He gets angry that the people of Nineveh actually listen to him and repent! He pouts under the sun. He pouts under a shady plant. Message: God's presence/love is impossible to escape, try as you might to do so.

Jesus calls his disciples. They immediately follow him. No hesitation. No thought to what might come next. They just embrace the opportunity and don't look back. Jesus must have been one charismatic individual to command that kind of attention. He proclaims that the kingdom of God is at hand, and it is – in his very person.

Most of the call stories in the Bible are somewhat spectacular. These are only two examples. There's also Isaiah and his burned lips, Ezekiel and the fiery chariot, Matthias winning the dice game, and Saul/Paul's blinding vision. Honestly, though, most calls to ministry are less than ordinary. They may be an inkling inside a person's soul. Usually, it's a recognition of God working in a person within the context of community.

We've come to understand that individual people are not the only receivers of calls. Entire communities can experience this phenomenon. Nineveh is a prime example of a call to repentance. Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus – communities in the first century – depended on Paul's guidance to continue their call to follow the way of Jesus.

I believe that the Episcopal Church is also being called to be something ancient in this 21<sup>st</sup> century in the year of our Lord. I'm not the only one. You only need to check out blogs and books to realize that the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church being invited to be less of an institution and more like those communities who were taking one step at a time, inviting people into a way of life that brings joy and ameliorates fear. The early church shared resources with each other. It was to view each person as equal in value in God's eyes. When it didn't, it received 'not-so-small-reminders' from the apostles of the error of their ways.

The early church was known by how they loved each other. People who would normally have been taken to the edge of town and abandoned because of age or illness or disability were taken care of by the community.

The primary outreach was within the neighborhoods they called home, but they sent resources abroad to support other communities that were in need. They took to heart Jesus' words that whenever they ministered to the least among them, they did the same to him. Their identity was centered in the love of God, as revealed to them in Jesus the Christ. They trusted the Holy Spirit for inspiration and guidance.

The early church was heavy on hope and personal relationship, and light on institutionalism. Not so much since Constantine!

As the western church gained in political power, it used fear to keep order within the 'ranks'. Heaven was promised to those who followed the Church's or the Pope's ways. A fiery punishment to those who didn't. However, one could buy themselves out of years of flames, and in doing so help create cathedrals, most of which stand to this day. As an institution, the Church is more concerned about keeping itself alive than it is sharing the hope and love of Jesus. The consequence of this concern is being seen today – shrinking congregations, buildings with deferred maintenance, a sense of defeat and lack of energy for programming.

Our beloved Redeemer is beginning to experience some of these concerns. I admit that last year was extremely difficult as a pastor. After the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> funerals of the year, I called my mentor to whine. I felt horrible. He put it to me succinctly, “Cricket, you’ve been there long enough now that you’re not burying parishioners any more, you’re burying friends. You actually love these people.”

Isn’t that how it feels? Losing good friends. One a year is enough for anyone’s psyche, but 10? That doesn’t help a community’s psyche either. It didn’t help stewardship either. You may have heard that old adage “You can’t take it with you”? Unfortunately, our friends who are in the nearer presence of God did just that! The deficit that we are looking at is almost exactly the amount of pledges we received from the people who have died. Because of their absence, and the absence of several people who have moved out of the area or returned to a previous parish.

I’m encouraged despite the grief. The pledges we received this year were increased from the year before. Our stewardship chairs gave us a boost of energy when we needed it most. Thank you Toyin and Tom. The Altar Guild managed to go with the flow of all the parament changes and extra services last year.

The flowers were always beautiful. Lay Eucharistic visitors helped tend to our homebound members.

When we needed a pick up, Chris and the choirs were there providing beautiful music to heal our souls. And, if we needed more than that, the healing ministers were there with their prayers and presence and the Wednesday morning prayer group kept all in need on God's front burner.

Our children bring us a glimpse of God's kingdom and I'm so thankful to all the kids and their parents who bring them to be with us each week. I'm grateful to Deacon Sue and our cooperative work with St. Dunstan's and St. Patrick's to make youth ministry a reality at Redeemer.

I'm grateful for a staff, both paid and volunteer, who keep the day-to-day items moving along with a minimum of blips and burps. I'm grateful to everyone who makes each Sunday happen, from the ushers to the young bell ringers!

I am also grateful to the Holy Spirit for leading us to this place where we can consider, or reconsider, what our future at Redeemer may be.

My predecessor had two purposes on which to rally support: the building renovation and the organ installation. Thanks to her and to those who were a part of Redeemer at that time, we have a beautiful worship space and an exquisite musical instrument.

Now, we need to identify a new purpose. We need to reimagine what it means to live into the name “Church of the Redeemer”. We need to embrace and rally behind the energy and hope and transformation that living as a Christian meant to the early church. For it was that which took the Way of Jesus from a small sect of Judaism to a majority of the population of the Western World.

Please consider words from theologians Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Ethan Enroe.

From Dr. King in 1963: *"...the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust."*

From Ethan Enroe in his blog: *We have replaced rich, robust theology in the Church with emotional music and constant reminders that “God is love and loves you and He’s your personal Savior and loves your soul ...” These words are great at bringing outsiders through the doors (because they’re true by and large) but poor at growing believers into mature witnesses with rich understanding of the deep things of God.*

*I have found the opposite to be very true. I have found that the more I learn about God, (God’s) Word and theology which describes (God), the more I can love and worship (God), because now there is that much more to adore and be amazed by. If my ability to worship God is a fire, learning more about (God) only adds more wood to the blaze. After all, if you really loved God, wouldn’t you want to learn as much about (God) as possible?*

*A church that offers only emotional, feel-good theology is going to lose the long-term wrestling match to a well-read and convincing atheist nearly every time.*

We are fortunate that Redeemer is one of the healthiest parishes I know. Our downward 'blips' should not alarm us, but they should get us thinking. In order to be good stewards of these buildings, our professional staff, and programming, we must grow. As I said at my first annual meeting with you, the average Sunday attendance of parishes who will thrive within the next 5-10 years is creeping up from 125 to 200+. However, we don't want to invite people into our community just to save our buildings and programs. We want to do this because we have something to offer – our hospitality, our love of one another, our belief in Jesus Christ in the midst of a secular world – that transcends the physical plant.

I propose two courses of action: learning to share our faith, both with each other and with others whom we invite to be with us; and growing in our faith through interactions with small groups that are proposed and led by lay people. After the necessary legal items of our annual meeting, we will be practicing both of those things, as well as having an open discussion of what purpose God may be calling us into.

Several people have already suggested small groups and have volunteered to lead them. Suggestions have been parenting groups, social justice groups, groups for men and women. We must continue supporting those groups that currently exist: Choirs, Foyer Groups, EfM groups. I'm attending a formation conference next week. I hope to bring back information on how to start online bible studies. I'd like also to begin at least one small spirituality circle at a community gathering place.

To help us begin to be comfortable in sharing our faith. You'll find cards on the tables downstairs. Choose one. Share your answer at your table. Take some cards home to use with your family. Use them to begin your small group meetings. Use them as practice so that you'll become comfortable sharing your faith with people who are looking for theirs.

I believe in resurrection. I believe God and Redeemer are in a place for new growth. People are searching for a place to work on their spiritual lives in an intimate community faithful to ancient traditions and simultaneously free to question and doubt. Let's invite them to come and see.

Amen.