

“And they left everything and followed him.”

Did you ever wonder how they did that? Was a fish miracle enough to make people turn their backs on everything they knew to follow this itinerant preacher? Would it be enough for you?

It would be incredibly easy to cop out and say that I really did do that when I moved here 4 years ago. Now, I ripped my husband away from everything he knew. But, I had a clue of what I was in for. After all, I'd been involved in parish ministry for 25 years – 15 as a deacon, 10 as a priest. One of the advantages I had in seminary was that I already knew how the sausage was being made. Church isn't always “Christian”. It has a reputation of being a really horrible employer. If you doubt that, allow me to introduce three of my female clergy friends who were abused and then terminated from their calls. There's even a book about this! It's titled “When Sheep Attack.”

But, I digress.

I believe that my invitation from Jesus to drop everything and follow him came in a different way. I wasn't asked to give up my home or my livelihood. Nope. I could keep all that. Jesus asked me to give up something more difficult. I had to give up what I had assimilated through my sterile Midwestern upbringing.

When I was ordained deacon, I was working for the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). We were the professional organization that supported the offices on college campuses that made sure students with disabilities were given the accommodations they required to be successful. So, the "ministry" I was engaged in was advocating for people with disabilities. It's just that I never really understood the whole disability part. To me, people were people. Some people just needed to do things differently. That mindset was what got me the job in the first place.

My 'real-life' job at AHEAD felt like ministry to me. It always had. Once I was ordained, though, I felt like I should have a 'real ministry' on a 'real margin' – as if what I was doing wasn't good enough.

So, silly me, I prayed to God to send me to a margin – one that was ‘legitimate’ and not ‘normal’ like the one I was doing everyday.

Be careful what you pray for.

I was ordained on November 9th, 1990. In December of 1990, one of the AHEAD members called me up and said “You are an Episcopal deacon.”

“I know.” I said. “You were at the ordination!”

“And you’re an advocate for people with disabilities.”

“I know.” I said. “I work with you, don’t I? You have a disability.”

“Well,” he said. “The National Episcopal AIDS Coalition is meeting next month in Atlanta. HIV/AIDS will be the disability of the ‘90s. You need to get your *tuckus* to Atlanta.”

I had a two-year-old at the time. Traveling was not exactly the easiest thing to do.

I hedged. I pleaded poverty. My friend would have none of it.

“Find the money. Get down here. I’ll transport you. I’ll feed you. I’ll put you up at our house. You MUST come.”

“Okay.” I said.

I put in a call to the diocese. Maybe I could tap into some fund there. That’s when I found out there was an AIDS Task Force and my friend Nancy was the chair. The next phone call netted me a plane ticket and money to help with expenses and purchase education materials for the diocese.

I got to Atlanta and attended the conference. I took the AIDS 101 class. I met the most incredible people. Most of them, almost all of them, are gone now.

The Eucharist for the conference was on a Thursday evening. It was open to the public and held at St. Philip's Cathedral. Bishop Doug Theuner (of blessed memory) preached a powerful and loving sermon. I sat in my pew looking around at everyone who was in the sanctuary that night.

There were people of every shade of every color. There were people who spoke different languages. There were people who were visibly sick and many whose sickness was still invisible. They were gay and straight and everything in between.

"Oh my God. This is what heaven is going to be like. I'm sitting in the midst of heaven."

That's when I realized that my world had just changed. That's when I realized that Jesus was inviting me into something much deeper than I'd ever imagined. That's when I tied up my preconception nets of sexuality, disease, and who deserves compassion behind.

Much like we do on the third Sunday of the month, the congregation was invited to participate in the laying on of hands and healing. I made my way to one of the stations.

“I don’t know what is happening with me right now,” I told the ministers. “But I think God is calling me to this ministry and I have no clue what I’m going to do about it.”

The ministers surrounded me with loving hearts and healing hands. Then I heard one of them pray, “And, please God, give her the gift of healing.”

OH CRAP. No God No! Please stop listening now. We were all good up to this point. Don’t say AMEN. NO NO NO

They said Amen.

I said Yes.

I went back to Doug's house a changed and somewhat frightened woman. What was I going to do – a straight, white, woman living in the suburbs? How was I going to do anything positive in this pandemic? I looked at my friend who'd insisted that I come and said, "You SOB. Why did you do this to me?"

"Because, hunny, maybe, they'll listen to you."

I sat in his car in silence for the rest of the ride home.

The next day, the chaplain of the Atlanta Integrity chapter asked me to be her deacon at their Eucharist that evening. I said yes.

As I brought the chalice to each person that night, each and everyone of them looked me in the eye. My heart was so full I thought it would burst. Here are these amazing people, whom church and society have marginalized, inviting me to be one with them. Jesus was in every pair of eyes.

The people I've known and loved who live or lived with HIV/AIDS taught me more about what it means to be a Christian than I've learned at any Sunday School or

seminary class. They taught me not only how to love them, but how to love myself as well. I was in my own version of a closet – and they helped me come out and become human.

I went back to Columbus and became involved in several AIDS Service Organizations, held the hands of the dying, mopped up the tears of the grieving, became the chair of the diocesan AIDS Task Force, and afflicted the status quo of the Diocese of Southern Ohio. It was so worth it.

And, so, my friends. If Jesus calls you. Go. The possibility is there that you may have to give up a job or a home or a bunch of material goods. The certainty is that you will have to give up the way you've always seen the world. When you do that, Jesus will be so real to you, you'll never want to go back to that closet. That's a good thing.

And to Doug, John, Bruce, Jesse, Buck, Ted, Stina, Sue....I love you. Always.

Amen.