

**First Lutheran Church
Aitkin Minnesota
Sunday, August 12, 2012**

I have prayed in all kinds of places:

I've done a lot of praying sitting in bleachers:

Prayers for my kids and grandkids –

- help for Jeff to do his best
- help for Janine to do her best
- help for Tyler to do his best
- help for Megan to do her best

Sometimes I would think –

That's kind of lame. There should be more like:

“Lord, help the kids on the other team to do their best too.”

Scratch that, Lord??

I've prayed in hospital beds, I've prayed over hospital beds.

I've prayed when planes were taking off and I've prayed when planes were coming in.

I've prayed in a lot of schools –

It has been said that as long as there are tests at school, there will be prayers.

I've prayed in all sorts of places and in all sorts of situations –

But I've never prayed in the belly of a great big fish!

Wait a minute – I take that back –

You know, whether you want to think of Jonah as literally being in the belly of a great big fish – or if you want to take the Jonah thing as a story to get across a point – the message is the same.

God had a job for Jonah to do –

Jonah did not want to do the job, and so he tries to run away.

So God worked it out so he could sort of have a conversation with Jonah – a conversation that gets Jonah back on the journey that God had in mind for him. So Jonah gets burped up on the road to Nineveh where he was supposed to be.

I've had those kinds of conversations – you have, too. Those direction changing kind of conversations.

“Bob, I want you to be a pastor.”

“A what?”

“A pastor. You know, a man of the cloth.”

“Oh, I don't think so. I have other plans. Being a pastor sounds kind of boring.”

Well, later on I got burped up on the lawn of Augustana Seminary in Rock Island, Illinois, and as they say, “the rest is history.”

My occupational plans were going one direction, and ended up going another direction. And, of course, there were other conversations –

“Bob, you should go see Sam.”

“I don't want to go see Sam.”

“You should go. Go have coffee with him or something. He is feeling kind of bad about calling

you a name.”

“Well, good.”

“It has been long enough. We don't want his spirit to get too beat up.”

“Spirit, mirit! Let him steam awhile longer.”

“I don't think that would be good. Why don't you get together for coffee.”

And so I got burped up at the front door of the coffee shop.

It seems God takes great delight in turning us around, and so off we go in a new direction.... or back to an original direction as we become turned around.

The story of Jonah keeps getting enacted again and again. And this call to a new direction – about getting turned around – sometimes we call this a conversion experience – where we are going along and God says, “Wait a minute – wrong direction.”

And we say, “Sorry about that. Help me to get back on track.”

Martin Luther and others talked about this being something that happens not once, but all the time, sort of a daily experience, where we say, “OK. I see what you mean, Lord. Forgive me. Help me to do better in going where you want me to go and in doing what you want me to do.”

Then there is the whole corporate thing – as we consider our life together – as a congregation, as a community, as a state, as a nation. There is so much that needs to get done in our world:

- people are hungry – 25,000 people die everyday due to starvation and the diseases brought on by malnutrition
- then there is malaria – the disease that kills more children than any other.
- and the wars
- and the oppression
- and the poverty
- and the homeless – 13,000 every night in Minnesota
- and there are the kids (and Dads and Moms too) who are needing to see a doctor or dentist, but cannot afford to do so.

We are the richest nation the world has every known and people live under bridges and in cardboard boxes. So much needless stuff.

So God would send us off in new directions –

Because all of this stuff is not what God had in mind when he set the whole thing up.

The idea was that everyone would draw forth a good life from the earth and live in peace. God could snap his fingers and just like that make everything right again – just like that.

But he chose another way –

To send Jonah to Nineveh, and to send all of us to the present day Ninevehs – far and near. To use you and me – we are His hands (“God's Work – Our Hands” is the ELCA slogan, which is appropriate indeed).

Remember, the call that came to our spiritual forefathers:

God came to Abraham and said, “You will be blessed to be a blessing. The world will be blessed by you. I will bless you, so you can bless everyone else!”

As the years went on, things were forgotten, overlooked, rebelled against, and the folks who

were blessed to be a blessing kept getting off track. They were going in the wrong direction. They booked passage to Tarshish when they were supposed to be going to Nineveh.

God would then whisper in the ears of the prophets, “Got a job for you.”

They were usually reluctant to go and try to be God's agent to help get people back on track. But there would be this deep conversation, and they would get burped up in Jerusalem or wherever, and would get in the face of those in charge or whoever was giving the poor and vulnerable a bad time... and would yell and scream that this whole scene was not right. “This is not what God had in mind! Get back on track. You are blessed to be a blessing!”

That is a word that comes to us today. God would have a deep conversation with us about what he had in mind when he set things up, and then would burp us up on the road to the modern Ninevehs – whenever things are not right, wherever the most vulnerable in our society and world are found.

This is a conversation and journey we have individually and also that we take together. The Scriptures are full of the calls to be involved in seeking justice – in helping make things right.

Remember the story that Jesus told about the traveler who was going down to Jericho and got mugged and left to die, and how people kept passing by on the other side.

Remember the point – that anyone who needs my help is my neighbor, and I'm called then to act in a neighborly way. Those lying beside the road to Jericho become our road to Nineveh. God says, “Go, go help, go do something about this. I need you to go. Be my hands. God calls us personally and corporately through our church and helping organizations and through the various levels of government.

And how sad, if at the end, we hear the Lord say, “Where were you when I needed you.” We can't expect God to bless us if we are running away from what He calls us to do.

But God is not passive about all of this – He stays very much involved, and so often when we are running the other way, we'll find ourselves burped up where we are needed.

So, if you find yourself in the belly of a big fish and having a deep conversation with the one who has good and gracious plans for His world, SMILE – because the one sitting next to you will probably be me.

Amen.

Pastor Bob Munneke